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Abstract

This essay examines the life, political career and the moral and intellectual universe of Deputy Colonel Baron Pál Prónay, the most important paramilitary leader in Hungary after the First World War. In historical memory and public imagination, Prónay's name is associated with militia, mob and state violence often described by contemporary liberals and socialists as the "White Terror," namely the harassment, arbitrary arrest, torture and execution of both political opponents and apolitical Jews after the collapse of the Soviet Republic in early August of 1919. The essay is based on hitherto unused or underused primary sources, such as Prónay's unpublished two-volume diary; trial documents; police reports; memorandums; internal communications between government agencies, civilian and military authorities; and private letters culled from five major archives, as well as contemporary newspapers, political pamphlets and novels and short stories written by well and lesser known writers. It seeks to unearth the details of Prónay's life and explain his behavior, in particular his cruelty and sadism, in the context of role expectations, behavior patterns and political and cultural values associated with the nobility, the minor aristocracy, the officer corps and gentlemen in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the early twentieth century. The essay looks at the techniques that Prónay used in his diary to project a favorable image while simultaneously destroying the reputation of his opponents as the first step towards political rehabilitation. Why he failed to achieve this goal, the mistakes that he made both as a writer and politician during his belated and desperate attempt in the early 1940s to regain favor with the political elite and the memory of the "White Terror" and Prónay's role in the Hungarian civil war are the subjects of this essay.

The destruction of the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian empires at the end of the First World War did not lead to peace in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Clashes between regular armies and paramilitary units continued long after the peace treaties with the vanquished states had been signed in 1920. Peacemaking was made difficult by, and coincided with, domestic upheavals that dramatically changed the social and political landscapes of the affected countries. Hungary, which declared its independence from Austria in October 1918, underwent two revolutions and a counterrevolution between 1918 and 1921. The new regime that emerged from the first, democratic revolution of October 1918 failed to reverse the slide into political and social chaos or defend the historical boundaries of the country. In March 1919, a group of leftist radicals, many of whom had participated in the Russian Revolution or had converted to Communism in POW camps in Russia, captured power. The product of this second revolution, the Hungarian Soviet Republic, took its cues from Moscow. It reformed the armed forces at enormous cost and, with the help of conservative and nationalist officers, was even able to reconquer some of the lost territories in the spring and early summer of 1919. The foreign policy of the new regime initially enjoyed nationwide support; its domestic policy proved to be much more controversial. Progressive reforms and the heavy-handed methods used to implement them soon alienated the upper and middle classes, without, however, securing the solid support of the proletariat and the agrarian poor. The failure to distribute the large estates among peasants, combined with the requisitioning of agricultural goods and the reintroduction of conscription, in particular, proved to be a serious mistake: it turned the largest social group, the peasantry, against the radical leftist regime. The army, manned mainly by peasant soldiers and commanded by conservative officers, lost its desire to defend the country against the invading armies of neighboring states. At the end of July, the Romanian army, acting on the behalf of the Entente powers, breached the front along the Tisza River, quickly dispersed the demoralized Hungarian Red Army, and entered the capital.

The leaders of the Bolshevik experiment, with a few notable exceptions, were able to leave the country before the entry of Romanian troops into Budapest. Normalcy did not return after their departure, however. In retribution for Communist crimes and the humiliation suffered during the leftist experiment, the officers' detachments, supported by the civilian militias and patriotic organizations, killed at least three thousand individuals over the next two years. At least one third of the victims of the counterrevolution were Jews. About seventy thousand people, predominantly political and labor activists but also innocent people caught up in the flow of events or denounced by jealous neighbors or colleagues, were thrown into overcrowded

jails and left to languish in hastily constructed internment camps. Tens of thousands of “illegal aliens,” the largest numbers Eastern European but also Hungarian Jews, who had lived in the country for generations, were deported and their lives ruined. In fear of retribution, at least a hundred thousand people, among them some of the best minds of Hungary, left the country permanently; at the same time, tens of thousands were fired from their jobs for their real or alleged support for the democratic and Communist regimes.¹ The terror wave began to slowly subside at the end of 1920, but isolated attacks on synagogues and Jewish clubs continued until the mid-1920s.

This essay examines the life and political career of Pál Prónay, the commander of the infamous Prónay Battalion, which killed and tortured more people than the rest of the paramilitary units combined. Prónay not only organized and commanded the most important militia in this period; as a close friend of Admiral Miklós Horthy, the commander-in-chief of the National Army and, after March 1920, the regent of Hungary, Prónay remained a powerful person in the country until the onset of consolidation in 1921. This essay touches on a number of hitherto neglected or underresearched topics such as the origins of the paramilitary groups, their organizational and motivational structure, and their role in the rise of Admiral Horthy and the consolidation of the counterrevolutionary regime. The detailed examination of Prónay’s life and political career sheds light on the complex relationship both between right-wing radicals and conservatives, and between the radical right and fascist groups in the 1930s and 1940s. Beside these political issues, the essay seeks to make an important contribution to social and cultural history. Unlike the other paramilitary leaders, such as Gyula Ostenburg and Iván Héjjas, Prónay left behind a two-volume diary, which helps us not only to reconstruct the details of his political life but also to map out the mental and cultural universe of a man whom many members of the progressive left viewed as the Hungarian Sade. Who was this man and what made him not only commit but also write about the most horrendous crimes of this period are the main concerns of the second section of the essay.

The essay’s structure reflects its double focus on political and social history. The first part is organized chronologically: it seeks to reconstruct, on the basis of primary sources pulled from five archives, the details of Prónay’s life. The second section follows a thematic sequence: it examines the images that Prónay had formed and tried to project of himself in his diary and his level of performance in the various social roles that he had either inherited or chosen during his life and career. I draw heavily on sociological theory, especially on the concept of “symbolic interactionism” as developed by Erving Goffman and his students. This theory highlights the conflict between Prónay’s pretensions and his meager talents; between the militia

leader's exulted view of himself and his failure to obey the simplest of rules and live up to the expectations associated with the roles that he claimed for himself—an aristocrat, a gentleman, a moral judge, a statesman, an “expert on Jews,” and, last but not least, a writer of diaries and memoirs determined to change historical memory. It brings us closest to the cause of Prónay's failure as a politician: the reasons why a man of Prónay's caliber could not survive long the onset of the consolidation of the country in 1921. The place of “toxic” individuals in modern society, their role in time of political and social chaos, the source of violence both within, in the mental make-up of such individuals, and without, in closely knitted social groups and society at large, is the subject of this essay.

The Life of Pál Prónay

Social Background, Education, and Early Career

Pál Prónay was born on November 2, 1874, in Romhány, Nógrád County, in the northern part of Hungary. His family was old and distinguished; the Prónays were among the handful of Hungarian aristocratic families that were able to trace their noble origins back to the Middle Ages. The family was first mentioned in legal documents during the troubled reign of László IV in the thirteenth century. In 1279, according to one of these documents, the ancestor of the clan, Recsk (Rechk) sheriff (*comes*), obtained, through the exchange of land, the village of Próna (today Slovenské Pravno in Slovakia). Fourteen years later, King András III rewarded Recsk's sons, Pál and Szerefil, with additional land for the help that the Prónay brothers had rendered him to obtain his throne and the services that they had given his relative, László, during the Polish campaign. In 1563, Ferdinand I confirmed the noble rank on Kristóf Prónay's sons, Mátyás and Mihály. In the eighteenth century, the family in Nógrád County split into two branches: the members of one branch remained common nobles, while those of other branch entered the rank of the minor aristocracy. László and Gábor Prónay, the ancestors of the aristocratic branch, occupied important positions in the hierarchy of Joseph II's absolutist state in the 1780s. László, the older of the two brothers, served the emperor as the high sheriff (*főispán*) of Csanád, Gömör, and Kishont counties, while Gábor was the superintendent of the school district in Pozsony. The brothers represented the best of what the Hungarian nobility

had to offer in the second half of the eighteenth century. The letters they wrote to their mother and sister are frequently cited by historians interested in the social and cultural life and mental universe of the Hungarian nobility. Because of the beauty of their language and the richness of emotions that they display, however, the same letters are also seen and appreciated as important pieces of Hungarian literature. László Prónay maintained regular correspondence with the poet and leading intellectual figure and cultural organizer of the time, Ferenc Kazinczy. “The Hungarian Voltaire” represented the main force behind the cultural/political movement aimed at the revival of the Hungarian language, which, like many Eastern and Central European languages, fell into disuse among the members of the elite in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A writer himself, László Prónay helped to orchestrate the campaign in the national parliament of 1790–1791 to make Hungarian the language of the elite in the early modern period. A decade earlier, in 1781, as one of the emperor’s closest advisors, László Prónay, the ancestor of the future militia leader and sadistic anti-Semite, Pál Prónay, helped to draft the famous Patent of Tolerance of 1781. The law guaranteed freedom of worship for Protestants and paved the way for the emancipation of Jews.²

The Prónay family remained culturally sensitive and politically progressive in the nineteenth century. Its most famous members include Sándor Prónay (born in 1760), the superintendent (*főfelügyelő*) of the Lutheran Church, member of the upper house of the parliament and an early and generous supporter, and later also a member, of the Hungarian Academy of Science; Albert Prónay (born in 1801), a famous legal expert and judge and one of the Crown Guardians (*koronaőr*), who, along with Baron Miklós Wesselényi and Aurél Dessewffy, helped to save lives during the flood of 1838 in Pest; Gábor Prónay (born in 1812), a lawyer, anthropologist, horticultural expert, and an affiliate (*levelezős*) member of the Hungarian Academy of Science; József Prónay (born in 1821), a legal expert, parliamentarian, and later undersecretary of state (*államtitkár*) in the Ministry of the Interior; Dezső Prónay (born in 1848), also a legal expert, parliamentarian and superintendent of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. Baron Dezső Prónay had a seat in the upper house of the parliament. His descendant, Baron György Prónay (1887–1968), was a close friend and political ally of Pál Prónay’s nemesis, the conservative politician, Count István Bethlen. A traditional conservative, Baron György Prónay admired Great Britain, opposed the alliance with Nazi Germany, and was considered the enemy of the radical, fascist, and anti-Semitic right in the late 1930s and early 1940s.³

In the late eighteenth century, the clan supported enlightened absolutism; in the nineteenth century, on the other hand, many of its members actively participated

in liberal and nationalist movements, which opposed absolutism. Pál Prónay's grandfather, Albert Prónay, studied philosophy with Hegel at the University of Jena; after graduation, he worked as a high-ranking civil servant and judge before entering the national parliament on a liberal ticket in the 1840s. Prónay's uncle, József, served, during the last stage of the Revolution and War of National Liberation of 1848–1849, as a dispatch rider for the last commander of the Hungarian Revolutionary Army, the legendary General Arthur Görgey. After the collapse of the revolution, he was forced to go into hiding. In 1850, the absolutist regime issued its famous amnesty order, which allowed ex-revolutionaries such as József Prónay to play once again an active role in public life. He entered parliament on a center-left ticket in 1865, quickly moved up the bureaucratic ladder, and in 1880 was appointed as undersecretary of state (*belügyi államtitkár*) in the Ministry of the Interior. From this position, he helped to reform the Hungarian penal system, an issue which had been close to his heart since the 1840s, and to reorganize the police force. Prónay's father, István, had served in the elite Hungarian Bodyguards during the Revolution and War of Liberation of 1848–1849 and was sentenced to death by the Austrian authorities after the defeat. His sentence was subsequently reduced, and he was able to leave prison on the basis of the same amnesty order in 1850. He then worked as a gentleman farmer and composed classical music in his free time. István Prónay had six sons: the two oldest, István and Ferenc, became hussar officers in the common (*k.u.k.*) army and later found jobs in the expanding Habsburg bureaucracy. Mihály Prónay had been trained as a civil servant and served as chief administrator, or high sheriff, in Nógrád County after 1906. László remained a gentleman farmer in Balasgyarmat. Pál Prónay became a *k.u.k.* hussar officer, while Károly, the youngest of the brothers, chose the navy. He died before the outbreak of the war, most likely of natural causes. Pál Prónay also had two older sisters, Margit and Sarolta (Mrs. István Zmeskál), mentioned only in passing in his diaries.⁴

Pál Prónay, the sadistic anti-Semite, who, in his diary, proudly called himself the first national socialist in Europe, came, in brief, from a politically progressive and culturally distinguished family. For decades, Hungarian historians unfairly portrayed him as a member of the declining and decadent gentry class; he was in fact a baron and minor aristocrat. There is no information in his diary about Prónay's childhood, but we can say with certainty that he did not experience want, which sociologists often blame for antisocial behavior and cruelty. His parents and nannies might have been strict, but there is also no evidence to suggest that they had mistreated him as a child or given him less love and attention than his siblings, none of whom turned out to be overly violent. At the age of twelve, Prónay was enrolled at a famous private

grammar school, the Laehne Institute in Sopron, a mid-sized town located along the border between Austria and Hungary. The school was founded by Friedrich Laehne, a Prussian-born educator and supporter of the Hungarian Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, although it is doubtful that it preserved much from its founder's liberalism and revolutionary spirit by the 1880s.⁵ The Laehne Institute lacked the patina and prestige of more established institutions, such as the famous Theresium in Vienna, which had been the main destination of male offspring of aristocratic families from all over the monarchy since the late eighteenth century. On the other hand, the Laehne Institute was more prestigious and, of course, more expensive, than the average high school, not to mention cadets' schools, which recruited their students almost exclusively from the lower middle class. The curriculum in the Laehne Institute was modern, the language of instruction German, and it provided more options for its graduates. The more driven and talented among them usually continued their studies at the best Austrian, German, or Hungarian universities or military academies, while the rest could also easily find jobs in the expanding civil service of the monarchy. While the majority of students at the Laehne Institute hailed from middle-class backgrounds, there were enough gentry and even aristocratic offspring among them to make the young Prónay feel at home. Admiral Miklós Horthy, the last commander of the Austro-Hungarian navy during the First World War and the regent of Hungary in the interwar period, had attended the same school in the 1880s. Prónay did not know Horthy, who was about ten years his senior. However, he counted two of Horthy's younger brothers, Szabolcs and Jenő Horthy, among his schoolmates and friends. The Laehne Institute was a good fit for the young Prónay, who remained proud of his alma mater throughout his life.

In his diaries, Prónay did not mention any of his teachers, favorite subjects, or his grades, which suggests that he may not have been a good student. By the late nineteenth century, scions of the middling nobility and even children of minor aristocratic families often enrolled at universities—institutions that had been earlier frowned upon by the nobility. Prónay's future commanding officer, István Horthy, for example, had studied law before he opted for a military career. Instead of enrolling at a university or military academy, Prónay entered the k.u.k. army as a volunteer in 1892 or 1893. Many nobles and increasingly scions of bourgeois, including Jewish, families chose this path to obtain the coveted title of "officer of the reserve," a title which in Central and Eastern Europe was considered both an accomplishment and a prerequisite for rapid advance in civil service careers. For the best connected candidates, mainly those of noble background, training as a reserve officer also provided an alternative route into military careers.⁷ The young cadet took advantage

of this opportunity secured by his family name and social connections to enter the officer corps. Prónay's family tradition and social status demanded that he choose a hussar unit as his home regiment; like most young aristocrats, he served in a cavalry unit, in this case, the 11th k.u.k. hussar regiment in Szombathely. In his diaries, the elderly Prónay remembered fondly the years that he spent as a young man in this ethnically mixed and highly civilized Austro-Hungarian town. Unusual for a writer of military diaries, he described in great detail the balls he had attended and the conquests he made, the restaurants and the taverns that he had regularly visited, and the winter sports that he pursued; he made, however, no reference to military training and what he had learned as a candidate. His stories are amusing; they also suggest that the young Prónay did not take his duties very seriously. He seems to have lacked direction and purpose in life: in 1898 or 1899, he temporarily left the army to try, for one to two years, his hand as a gentleman farmer on the estate of his brother in Kisszelő. In 1901 he returned to active duty, however. He first served in his old unit in Szombathely and then in the 13th k.u.k. Jászkun hussar regiment in Kecskemét before the war. The regiment was the fourth most prestigious hussar unit in Hungary; while the majority of commanders came from the lower nobility, one could still find a number of individuals with historic names, such as Széchenyi and Apponyi, among both reserve and active officers. The commander of the regiment was Colonel István Horthy, the brother of the future regent.⁸

Prónay enjoyed his time in Kecskemét and had a high opinion of his commanding officer, who seems to have taken a liking to him, as well. In 1906, on furlough, he traveled to North Africa; in 1913, on official assignment, he visited England and Belgium. In the same year, he was sent to Vienna for further training. In spite of foreign trips and additional training, he progressed slowly in his military career; at the outbreak of the war in July 1914, at the age of forty, he was still a first lieutenant (*főhadnagy*), a rank that the more ambitious and talented officers obtained by the age of twenty-six. While the lucky few who were not killed or maimed during the military conflict advanced quickly, Prónay failed to do so. In his application for promotion as a deputy major (*alezredes*) in August 1919, Prónay claimed that that he spent thirty-six months at the front line during the war.⁹ In his diaries, he told a slightly different story. He claimed that he had been wounded in the left arm in Galicia in early 1915 and then spent the remainder of that year and the first half of 1916 at home recuperating and visiting famous spas, such as the one in Baden bei Wien.¹⁰ After his return to active duty in late 1916 or early 1917, he served in the ethnically mixed 64th k.u.k. infantry regiment, an assignment that, since infantry officers tended to be commoners, the class-conscious young Prónay must have

perceived as a demotion. In early 1918, Prónay had also attended a training course for infantry officers and then served during the last months of the war on the Italian front, where he witnessed some of the bloodiest battles of the entire conflict.¹¹

Prónay compiled, in brief, a respectable, yet far from outstanding, record first as a cavalry and later as an infantry officer. Unlike his legitimist rival, Col. Anton Lehár, Prónay did not return home as a hero; neither did he receive any of the major decorations for bravery, such as the Order of Leopold.¹² While Miklós Horthy moved in rank, in army terms, from a colonel to admiral, Prónay barely progressed: in 1918, he was still a captain. On the other hand, he survived the war relatively unscathed, which was more than the majority of Austro-Hungarian officers could claim. What held him back in his career remains unclear. Prónay loved to fight, and even in his fifties he did not hesitate to risk his life in duels by challenging much younger officers over a misconstrued word or gesture. In 1944, at the age of seventy, he donned a uniform once again to fight Russian troops on the streets of Budapest. The reason for the slow progress was thus not a lack of courage. It may have to do with his scant interest in military technology and science (in his lengthy diaries, Prónay did not mention any of the major battles or discuss military technology, strategy, and tactics at all) or, more likely, with the perceived faults in his character. In his diary, the paramilitary leader acknowledged that in the 64th k.u.k. infantry regiment he had constantly quarreled with Romanian and Saxon officers; in 1918, he denounced them to his immediate superiors and to the Ministry of War in Vienna as traitors. Prónay was most likely seen as a difficult, hot-tempered, and, as far as his treatment of his subordinates was concerned, uncommonly cruel man. In 1918, just before the end of the war, Prónay was charged with having repeatedly beaten one of his subordinates, a Jewish reserve officer, named Rozgonyi. His obsession with Jews and his violent anti-Semitism most likely had a negative impact on his career, since there were more Jewish officers in the Austro-Hungarian army than in than any other military in Europe.

In August and September 1918, the leaders of the loosely organized radical right groups began to plan a preventive counterrevolution. They recognized that the urban middle class in Budapest was too weak to stem the revolutionary tide and oppose, with arms if necessary, the organized working class on the streets. Instead, they planned to mobilize the provinces and the peasants under the leadership of conservative provincial administrators and the activists of radical right organizations, such as the Agrarian League (*Gazdaszövetség*), against the capital. In the shadow of the military defeat, Archduke József and his military advisors also discussed the possibility of withdrawing Hungarian units from the front to prevent the outbreak

of the revolution and maintain order on the streets; they were also prepared to make political concessions and planned to introduce universal suffrage in order to deflate revolutionary agitation. By early October, teachers, railway workers, postal employees, and policemen had been organized into counterrevolutionary cells. All these plans and efforts, however, proved to be in vain. While the radical right and conservative leaders could not prevent the outbreak of the revolution, the structure that they had created in the fall of 1918 survived the turmoil only to merge into a new and more powerful organization, the irredentist and counterrevolutionary League of Territorial Integrity (Területvédő Liga) in December 1918. The plan to lead a peasant army against the capital would also have a long career: it was first suggested by counterrevolutionary groups within the Ministry of Defense, led by István Friedrich and Gyula Gömbös in December 1918 and later, in the summer of 1919, by the minister of defense in Szeged, Miklós Horthy.¹³

It is unlikely that Prónay was involved in the planning of a peasant rebellion, which was in any case a stillborn idea based on a complete misunderstanding of peasants. Prónay had other priorities: the October Revolution of 1918 found him in Vienna, where he watched with a mixture of disgust and amusement the dismantling of the Dual Monarchy and the creation of the new republic. In early November, he returned to Hungary; after a few days in Budapest, he traveled by car or train to Kecskemét, hoping to find his old unit, the 13th Jászkun hussar regiment. He found the remnant of his unit in the Rudolf military base. The town and the entire country were in turmoil. The officers in the town, including those who had come from the occupied territories, were ambivalent about the October Revolution; yet the majority, at first, were prepared to tolerate the new regime. Prónay, like the majority of officers, seems to have been politically disoriented and overwhelmed by these events. That his name also came up as the revolutionary soldiers voted to elect their new commander suggests that the rank-and-file did not see him first as an enemy of the democracy. In this he resembled the young Adolf Hitler, who, as recent research shows, was also favorably disposed toward the revolution at first and even contemplated entering the Social Democratic Party.¹⁴ Prónay's election fell through, however, because his former orderly, a man by the name of Csomor, denounced him as a man of unusual cruelty.¹⁵ Afraid of Csomor and his friends, Prónay was soon forced to move out of the base and rent a room with a friend and fellow officer in the city. If we can believe his diary, Prónay and his future enemy and minister of the interior, the legitimist Ödön Beniczky, began to organize a reliable militia, called the Brigade of the Plain (Alföldi Brigád) against the government sometime in November. Like the majority of his fellow officers, Prónay did not identify with the new regime

for long. The pacifist rhetoric of some of the leading members, compounded by its failure to defend the country's historical borders and respect the interests of officers alienated Prónay from the democratic experiment relatively early on.¹⁶ He and his fellow officers, however, were still unable and perhaps even unwilling to provide effective opposition to the regime. Peasants on the Southern Hungarian Plain, the region between the Danube and Tisza rivers, who were wealthier and socially and politically more conservative than their counterparts to the east and south, initially supported the revolution. Only in the spring and summer of 1919 did they join the counterrevolutionary movement, by staging a series of bloody revolts against the Soviet Republic.¹⁷ By then, however, Prónay had long left the region. The organization of the militia, as Prónay himself was forced to admit, because of the peasants' indifference, never went beyond this stage.

In his diaries, Prónay typically blamed the failure to set up a strong militia on his comrades, especially Beniczky. It is doubtful, however, that in November and December 1918, he cared much about the Alföldi Brigád. Disappointed with the democratic experiment and what it had to offer to officers, Prónay, for a while, played with the idea of emigrating to Latin America. His dream was to become a rancher in Mexico or Argentina. In any case, after a sentimental ceremony which marked the dissolution of his old unit, the 13th k.u.k. hussar regiment, he left Kecskemét in early December 1918. For lack of a better option, he thought of taking up farming again, working perhaps as a manager on the estate of his cousin, József Prónay, in the village of Romhány. József's sudden death, however, and the fact that the two adult sons of József's younger brother, Endre, were also without employment, once again prevented the future militia leader from proving his talent as a gentleman farmer. Thanks to his connections, he soon found a job with the Federal Inspectorate of Horses (Országos Lófelügyelőség) as a procurer of farm animals. The institution stood under the control of the District Military Command in Budapest, and Prónay reported directly to its head, Maj. Victor Stojanovics. In his free time, he met with like-minded conservative officers, such as István Zsilinszky, the brother of the well-known right-radical journalist, Endre Zsilinszky, and Béla Marton. He remained, however, a minor and even insignificant figure in the counterrevolutionary movement, which was rapidly gaining momentum in early 1919.

In his diaries, Prónay claimed that his friends were full of hot air ("csak rotyogás folyt") and did not know how to act. Most likely, it was he who had remained ambivalent about the counterrevolutionary cause and supported it only halfheartedly. The police, who had been keeping a close eye on the group for some time, arrested at least two of its members, Capt. József Görgey and Győző Wisinger, immediately

after the radical leftist takeover of power on March 23, 1919. Significantly, Prónay was not among the detainees, which suggests that the new regime did not consider him a serious threat.

The arrest of his friends made Prónay even more cautious and less political. Concerned about his safety, he kept a low profile during the first months of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. To fool informers and divert the attention of police spies, he wore only civilian clothing and even put a red pin, a common socialist symbol, on his hat. The trick must have worked, or no one took him seriously as a political threat, because he was not even questioned by the police during the next few months. He seems to have lived the life of a private individual. In his diary, Prónay bragged that he had been able to procure alcohol even during the “dry” months of Communist rule and, while hundreds of thousands of people went hungry in the capital, he dined at restaurants that continued to serve decent food and good wine. Whereas countless refugees from the invaded territories, such as Transylvania, were forced to live in the squalor of homeless shelters and cattle cars, Prónay rented a room in the recently built, elegant, and expensive Hotel Gellért. Unlike the thousands of conservative officers who had quickly overcome their revulsion to Communism and joined the Red Army to defend the country against the invading Czechoslovak and Romanian forces, he avoided the draft by obtaining, through a friendly doctor, a medical certificate to prove he was an invalid.

After the Communist takeover in March 1919, Prónay continued to work for the Federal Inspectorate of Horses, and, in his capacity as procurer of horses for the army, which increasingly meant confiscation of farm animals, he drew a civil service salary from the Soviet state. Vaguely aware that this information might compromise his reputation as a resistance fighter, Prónay claimed that he had used his job to spread anti-Semitic propaganda among peasants. With pride he recalled in his diaries that he had always driven a hard bargain with Jewish commercial farmers and merchants and, on many occasions, he simply confiscated their horses. Never averse to taking material advantage of his position as an officer or civil servant, in early 1919 he even sent his brother, Mihály, two horses as “compensation” for the two horses he had lost during the war. Typically, his greatest fear during the first month of Soviet rule was that he might be caught gambling or violating the prohibition law on purchasing and drinking alcohol. Prónay was never singled out as an enemy of the new regime: neither he nor any of his close family members were arrested, tortured, or killed by the police or the Red militias. As part of their drive to create a more egalitarian society, the radicals did confiscate Prónay’s savings, however. The more than sixty thousand koronas, which had been deposited in the

Jewish-owned Hazai Bank, represented, indeed, a small fortune at the time, and its loss posed the threat of further social decline. The future militia leader also suspected that he had come under police surveillance, which he feared would soon lead to his arrest. Be that as it may, Baron Prónay clearly had no place in Soviet Hungary in the long run. His decision to escape from “Red” Budapest, rather than join the various and increasingly active counterrevolutionary groups in the city, may not have been the most courageous one. It did improve his chances of surviving the radical leftist experiment unscathed, however, and paved the way to his future success as a counterrevolutionary.

Prónay left Budapest on May 6, 1919, with a doctor’s recommendation that he “take the water” at a spa in Vass County. He made several short stops along the way to visit friends and colleagues, which shows that his life was not in danger and that he was not eager to join the fight against the regime. The brother of a restaurant owner whom Prónay had known from his youth smuggled him across the border, and from there he simply took the train to Vienna. During his short exile in the Austrian capital, which was also in turmoil, Prónay seems to have taken only a marginal interest in politics; in any case, he did not play a major role in any of the counterrevolutionary organizations and clubs that had sprung up after the Communist takeover in Hungary. The most important organization, the Anti-Bolshevik Committee (ABC), had been founded before his arrival, and was led by aristocrats such as Count István Bethlen. These politically sophisticated aristocrats barely knew Prónay and felt no need to ask for his advice. The future militia leader seems to have had no contact with Col. Anton Lehár and his group of legitimist officers, who set up their headquarters in the Carinthian town of Gratz, either. Prónay arrived too late to participate in the theft of 150 million koronas in a raid on the Hungarian Embassy on May 2, 1919. In vain did he try in his diaries to suggest that he had something to do with the exploit, by listing the names of people who had participated in the robbery as members of his detachment. Nor did he participate in the disastrous “Battle of the Bruck” on May 5, 1919, when about forty officers attacked Hungarian border guard units loyal to the Communist regime in an attempt to create a power base along the Austrian border. In other words, Prónay remained a marginal figure in Vienna, one of the hundreds of unemployed army officers seeking to sell their services to the highest bidder. As a telling sign of his lack of commitment to the cause of the counterrevolution, in Vienna he again began to toy with the idea of emigrating to Latin America. In the famous and expensive Sacher Restaurant, he met his old comrades, including the Görgey brothers and Miklós Szemere. Szemere, who had gained his reputation as a professional gambler and noted anti-Semite, told him about the formation of a

counterrevolutionary government in Arad and the gathering of counterrevolutionary politicians and officers in the southern town of Szeged. The ABC used the money stolen from the Hungarian Embassy (part of the booty that its leaders did not pocket) in May to recruit reliable officers and transport them from Vienna to Szeged. Szemere asked his friend, the unemployed captain, to join the next transport. Attracted by the promise of a regular salary and adventure, Prónay traveled in early June with the same train and in the same compartment with his old friends, György and József Görgey and Ákos Keresztes, from Vienna to Szeged via Graz, Zagreb, Szizsek, Eszék, Góla-Szabadka. The trip was rather uneventful, and they arrived safely in Szeged.

Prónay in Szeged and Siófok

It was in Szeged that Prónay began to take a deeper interest in politics and became a political factor in his own right. The picturesque town, which had been rather progressive politically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was flooded by counterrevolutionary officers and politicians in the spring and summer of 1919. In Szeged, the then unknown Prónay rubbed shoulders with famous politicians and military leaders. The morning after his arrival in early June, in the lobby of Hotel Kass, the favorite meeting place of the counterrevolutionaries, he met the last commander of the Austro-Hungarian navy and future regent of Hungary, Admiral Miklós Horthy.¹⁸ In his diary, Prónay claimed that it was at this meeting where he had first suggested setting up an officers' battalion. In the early 1920s, however, Capt. Gyula Gömbös, retired General Staff officer and head of the recently formed veterans' organization, the Hungarian National Defense Association (Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület, or MOVE), told everyone, that it was his idea; he claimed that he had created the core of what later became the Prónay Detachment in April 1919, that is, before the arrival of either Prónay or Horthy in Szeged.¹⁹

Gömbös, a workaholic, excellent organizer, and outstanding self-promoter, was indeed better trained and better placed to undertake the organization of the first officer's detachment. It was also Gömbös who, on June 4, the same day that Prónay met Horthy and allegedly came forward with the proposal, convened a meeting of the MOVE in the Tisza Hotel. The war veterans present at this meeting unanimously entrusted Prónay with the organization of the first officers' detachment, justifying their decision on the basis of Prónay's "talent, determination, uncompromising heroism and courage proven in many bloody battles."²⁰ Since very few of these men had known Prónay before his arrival in Szeged or were familiar

with his war records, his election most likely had been prearranged by Gömbös, who had few friends among the powerful diplomats and military leaders gathered in Szeged, and may have wanted to use the ruthless Prónay in his political games to blackmail and silence his rivals. The two had much in common: both were nobles, professional soldiers, nationalists, and radical anti-Semites. However, it is also possible that Prónay was elected by default. Many of his fellow officers, members of the powerful inner group called “the twelve captains”—which included, beside Gyula Gömbös, such luminaries of the radical right as László Magasházy and Tibor Eckhardt, Miklós Kozma (the future head of the Hungarian Information Agency), Gyula Toókos and Victor (Győző) Ranzenberger—harbored political ambitions; these determined young men did not want to waste their time training soldiers. On the other hand, Prónay’s family name, his masculine charisma, his anti-Semitism and, last but not least, his perceived ruthlessness recommended him as the leader of the most important paramilitary unit.

The Ministry of Defense ordered the creation of the first officers’ company on June 14, 1919. By then, however, the organization of the Prónay Company detachment was well advanced. It was not an easy task: guns, ammunition, uniforms were in short supply, and Prónay and his men, with the permission of local commanders, had to rummage through the storage facilities of the two military bases in Szeged to get what they needed. Fortunately for them, the French occupational authority raised no objection to the creation of an officers’ detachment, and it even provided them with small arms. The Serbs were also forthcoming: they released about seventy officers from prison in June, many of whom entered the Prónay Detachment on the spot. Thus, as the result of a successful recruitment campaign, Prónay had, within a month, between one hundred fifty and one hundred seventy men under his command. The officers’ detachment enjoyed the support of the municipal government of Szeged, which assigned a convent on Madách Street, across from the school that housed the occupying French colonial troops, as the detachment’s temporary base. The wives and daughters of the local elite diligently collected socks, underwear, towels, and silverware for the troops and furnished their rooms with chairs, tables, and cabinets. As if these favors had not been enough, the Ministry of Defense provided monthly stipends to the members of the Prónay Company. It started out as an elite unit: the presence of more than a dozen aristocrats and the overrepresentation of nobles in the unit (they made up at least a quarter of the company’s membership in the fall of 1919) underscored its elite status.²¹ Organizing the group could not have been easy, and Prónay, perhaps for the first time, worked hard to live up to his superiors’ expectations. His diligence and undeniable charisma notwithstanding, without the

support of the national and local elite, and the constant backing and advice of the MOVE chief, Gyula Gömbös, he would not have been able to complete his task.

The Prónay Detachment had been established with the help of the local elite; yet its very existence soon came to violate local sensitivities. In the interwar period, local middle-class leaders, proud of their counterrevolutionary past, emphasized that the Prónay Company was not the first paramilitary unit in the city. The first officers' company, they argued, was created on May 6, 1919, a month before Prónay's arrival. The next day, the company occupied the Mars military base, which made it possible for the counterrevolutionary government to move its seat from Arad to Szeged. Both as organizers and donors, Jewish businessmen and dignitaries played a major role in the founding of the ABC in the city; the platoon that occupied the military base was, in fact, made up almost exclusively of Jewish reserve officers. Paradoxically, it was thus a bourgeois and heavily Jewish unit that functioned as a forerunner to the interwar National Army.²² The rewriting of the past, however, began very early, in June 1919, when Gömbös told local politicians and military leaders that he had set up the Prónay Company to serve as a model for the allegedly disorganized and politically unreliable local units. His remark that the Prónay Detachment had been formed to protect Admiral Horthy and members of the government was perceived even then as an insult; local military commanders were quick to point out that their units would have been perfectly capable of carrying out these tasks. The formation of the Prónay Detachment, and the favored treatment it had received from the start, was thus a source of tension between locals and outsiders, and between the Prónay Company and the officers of less favored units.²³

Conservative members of the political and military elite saw the Prónay Company as a powerful weapon in their fight for power, a means to defeat their domestic enemies, terrorize potential foes, and impress neutral bystanders. Like the Lenin Boys during the Red Terror, the Prónay Company was conceived as having mainly a domestic function; fighting with foreign forces never was a priority. In the realm of politics, the Prónay Detachment stood closest to the Gömbös-Kozma-Toókos group. Gömbös, who, in many respects resembled Mussolini, wanted to use Prónay and his men as enforcers. A man of great organizational talent, who shared Prónay's radical anti-Semitism, Gyula Gömbös, however, was a social outsider (his claim to have descended from an old noble family was not taken very seriously).²⁴ Baron Prónay, too, saw Gömbös as an upstart, and often refused to follow his orders. The conflict-ridden relationship between the most important paramilitary leader and the only person who had the talent and charisma to become the Hungarian Mussolini began in Szeged; had Gömbös been able to fully subordinate Prónay to his will and

unite the political and military wings of radical right and protofascist movements, Hungarian politics might have developed differently, the far right posing a greater threat to the conservatives and even capturing power in the early 1920s.

Prónay proved to be an unreliable ally and a rebellious subordinate to the ambitious Gömbös. Both were determined to succeed quickly; early on, both began to amass power by usurping functions which in normal times would have fallen to professionals and civil servants. Prónay's company functioned as Horthy's Praetorian Guard, protecting members of the government and guarding public buildings and major installations. In Szeged and later in Siófok and Budapest, however, the company usurped the functions of the political police. Prónay's "detectives" (young reserve officers with no police training) infiltrated rival political groups and social organizations; they arrested, imprisoned, tortured political opponents and innocent Jews in the cellars of the convent on Madách Street assigned to them as their temporary headquarters. They operated spies in territories still controlled by the Soviet regime and sent regular reports to the Army Supreme Command and the Ministry of Defense. Prónay's men also acted as border guards, arresting real and alleged smugglers and blackmarketeers and often confiscating their goods. The foundation of the unprecedented power that the Prónay, and to a lesser extent the Ostenburg, battalion acquired in late 1919 and early 1920, was laid in Szeged. They owed their power to the military elite who wanted to use these fanatics to strike terror in the hearts of their enemies, discourage dissent, and increase respect for the weak counterrevolutionary regime. Convinced that they served their purposes, Horthy and other members set the paramilitary groups free on the unsuspecting population of the provincial town.

With their growing power, the paramilitary groups, the Prónay Company in particular, soon began to pose a threat to law and order in the city. Angry at the world, counterrevolutionary officers saw enemies everywhere. Prónay, in particular, had paranoid tendencies. In his diary, he portrayed Gen. Károly Soós, the chief of the General Staff, as a coward and a crypto-Communist and dismissed conservative politicians, such as István Bethlen, Pál Teleki, and Count Aladár Zichy, the latter an important figure in the Christian Socialist movement, as Freemasons, liberals, and worse, "friends of the Jews." He accused Dr. Lajos Varjassy, a progressive democrat, friend of the leaders of the local French forces, and a member of the counterrevolutionary government, of high crimes: that he had allegedly received six million koronas from Béla Kun, was in regular contact with the Communist government in Budapest, and represented the interests of Freemasons and Jews. Prónay and his men wanted to assassinate Dr. Varjassy, and only a timely intervention by Horthy

saved his life.²⁵ It was not only people who did not share his politics but also his professional intimates and closest ideological allies who were vulnerable to Prónay's whims. In July, he planned to assassinate Horthy's aid-de-camp and his one-time friend, Capt. László Magasházy, on the charge that he had become "an intrigue and a politician." Only a last minute intervention by Capt. György Görgey, Prónay's colleague, helped to avert the disaster.²⁶

While no one was safe, the main targets of Prónay's and his men's anger remained middle-class and upper-middle-class Jews (many of whom had supported the counterrevolution with arms and money). Prónay's officers regularly attacked Jewish patrons in restaurants and cafés; they beat up young war veterans and middle-aged men alike and ordered entire families to leave the public beach. Admiral Horthy and the members of his entourage did nothing to discourage and, if we can believe Prónay's diaries, even approved the attacks.²⁷ On the other hand, as murders became more frequent, and the naked remains of the victims began to be washed up on the shores of the Tisza River, some conservatives began to express misgivings about Prónay and his men. Traditional officers also worried. They generally respected Prónay's men, many of whom had built up distinguished military records. However, they also doubted the detachment's military value, resented the favors and attention that it had received from the political and military elite, and were angered by the chaos caused by this unit. Many high-ranking officers of the old school, and politicians concerned with their reputations sought to keep their distance from Prónay and his followers early on. It could not be an accident that only a few politicians and high-ranking officers were present at the flag dedication ceremony of the Prónay Detachment on July 17, 1919. Only young MOVE officers turned up in great numbers at the celebration; Gömbös had his wife act as "the flag mother," thus strengthening his claim over the paramilitary unit as his private militia. The flag dedication ceremony of the 46th (Diendorfer) infantry regiment two days later in the Mars military base, however, was graced with the presence of the entire government, the political and military establishment, and the local elite. Admiral Horthy was also in attendance and even gave a short speech.²⁸ The elite thus began to erect barriers, which Prónay and his men, in spite of the favors they continued to receive, found difficult to cross. Horthy set up his headquarters in the exclusive Hotel Kass; it was in the rooms of this posh hotel where much of the government's business was conducted. Prónay rarely attended these meetings, even though he and men could be seen on the balcony of the building late in the afternoons. By contrast, he and his men continued to frequent the Onozó, a local restaurant, which served excellent fish soup (*halászlé*) and cheap wine at a reasonable price.

In his diary, Prónay claimed that it was he and his officers who turned Horthy into a national figure by electing him honorary chairman of MOVE on July 5, 1919.²⁹ Kálmán Shvoy, then a young counterrevolutionary military officer in Szeged but no friend of the officers' detachments, also described the relationship between Horthy and Prónay as both close and damaging to the reputation of the new armed forces.³⁰

Shvoy wrote his memoirs after the Second World War; his description of events that had taken place twenty years earlier may have been colored by the lost war and the Russian conquest. The opinion of the right radical Shvoy was, strangely enough, echoed by Marxist historians after 1945, who liked to describe the admiral as a weak and indecisive man dependent on the political advice and emotional support of more charismatic individuals, such as Prónay and Gyula Gömbös.³¹ Prónay's claim that he "had made Horthy" thus should not be taken at face value; since Gömbös, and not Prónay, headed the MOVE, it was most likely he, and not Prónay, who had engineered Horthy's election behind the scenes. Prónay, moreover, was too politically unsophisticated to understand that lasting power does not rest on violence or the threat of violence alone. Horthy owed his rise to a number of factors, of which (limited) control over the militias was only one. His status and reputation as a military hero and the last commander of the Austro-Hungarian navy; the social capital that his large and well-established gentry family had accumulated through the centuries; his connection to foreign diplomats and military officers; his ties to, and later friendship with, the rising star of the conservative authoritarian right, Count István Bethlen; the support of the overactive and, among the young officers, influential, Gyula Gömbös and "the twelve captains" combined with the mistakes and sheer incompetence of his political rivals, almost predestined the admiral to play, for better or worse, an important role in interwar Hungarian history. Prónay was, indeed, one of Horthy's closest advisors and friends in 1919 and 1920. The admiral liked the paramilitary leader, who was closer to him in age, life experience, and social status than other members of the military clique, including the MOVE chief, Gyula Gömbös.³² Listening to his advice was not same thing as following it, however. For example, at the end of July, Prónay proposed to cross the demarcation line with his unit, without the permission of the French army (which controlled southern Hungary), destroy the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and organize a pogrom in the capital. His plan was rejected because neither Admiral Horthy nor the chief of the General Staff, Gen. Károly Soós, wanted to risk a conflict with the Entente powers. Prónay may have amassed significant power in Szeged as intelligence chief and head of Horthy's praetorian guards, yet at this early stage he exercised only limited influence on domestic and foreign policy.

In early August, after the collapse of the Communist regime in Budapest, the French finally gave their permission for the units of the National Army to leave Szeged. The exact nature of Prónay's orders is unclear from the sources, and historians disagree as to whether Horthy, as the supreme commander of the National Army, or any other members of his military entourage ordered Prónay and his men to summarily execute people. The regent, to the end of his life, denied that he ordered the paramilitary units to kill anyone. Yet in his memoirs, he also expressed sympathy for the officers who took revenge for the torture and humiliation of their family members during the Communist interlude and vented their frustration on people, such as Jews and liberals, whom they blamed for the mutilation of their country.³³ Col. Jenő Pilch, Gyula Gömbös's close friend, one of the leaders of the MOVE, and Horthy's first biographer, argued that "pacification" and the restoration of order rather than fighting the invading Romanian Army was the main task, the very rationale for the existence of the National army; he also acknowledged that "the pacification measures" to be taken were frequently discussed by the Army High Command in July 1919. Yet Pilch denied that any order aimed at putting these recommendations into practice was ever issued.³⁴ Prónay claimed that he asked Horthy and Soós, to put their orders, which he implied included the summary execution of "Communists," into writing, but the foxy Soós refused his request: "To cover myself and the leaders of my platoons, I raised the issue of responsibility and asked the orders and instructions to be included into a written statement. Since the chief of the General Staff had denied, with a sly grin, this request, I and my officers asked permission to leave. No problem, I thought, I will make happen what you, the people in authority, do not dare to write down. In the end, General Soós shook hand with each and every one of us, wished us good luck and sent us on our way gracefully, saying: 'and [one more thing], do not kill too many Jews, because that could cause problems, too.'"³⁵

In his diary, Prónay also claimed that his instructions were to cross the demarcation line first; move his company into the region between the Danube and Tisza rivers; destroy resistance and arrest and punish the functionaries of the Communist regime; restore the prerevolutionary administrators to their positions or set up local governments; disarm, and if they proved reliable, absorb Red Army units; and collect armament, trucks, trains, wagons, horses, food, equipment, and money for the National Army. The detachment was to reach Budapest and report to the Ministry of Defense after their arrival. Prónay and his men began their pacification campaign in the village of Szatymaz, only one day after they had left Szeged: there, Prónay had ten people arrested and hanged. The next two months, the tragedy in Szatymaz was repeated countless times. Although, in his diary, Prónay portrayed the cleans-

ing operation as highly dangerous, in reality, they encountered little resistance from their victims (supporters of the defunct Soviet Republic, Jews, and the rural poor), while the local elite and middle class, in many places, received them with flowers and band music. In the village of Kiskunmajsa, Prónay learned that the Romanians had overtaken his unit, and he could not enter Budapest. Deeply disappointed, since his goal was to close “the Budapest ghetto,” he decided to change course: on August 8, the company crossed the Danube at the village of Solt and occupied the town of Dunaföldvár. From there the company continued its march, marked by gallows, crying widows, and distraught children, through the villages of Előszállás, Czece, Simontornya, Ozora, and Enying to their new headquarters in the town of Siófok on the southern shore of Lake Balaton.

In the early 1920s, Vilmos Böhm, the minister of defense in the Károlyi government in the fall of 1919, painted an unflattering picture of the militias. These “heroes,” Böhm argued, were not courageous and patriotic enough to fight the invading Romanians; instead they turned on the peaceful and defenseless population of their own country.³⁶ Convinced that they were fighting for the right cause, Prónay’s men, indeed, intensified their terror campaign after their arrival in the town of Siófok in mid-August. A picturesque resort town on the shores of Lake Balaton and a favorite destination of the Jewish upper middle class, Siófok witnessed some of the greatest anti-Semitic atrocities in Hungarian history. In August and September, the small town housed, beside the Prónay Company, the Madary, the Ostenburg, the Jankovics, and the Siebenlist detachments. The pacification campaign carried out by these and other units, including Col. Anton Lehár’s troops, encompassed the entire Transdanubian region, with the exception of the southern counties that remained under Serbian occupation. Especially hard hit were the villages and towns along the Danube River and around Lake Balaton. The victims included, in addition to the functionaries of the democratic and Communist regimes, peasants and estate servants who demanded land reforms or higher wages and apolitical and conservative Jews. In many villages and towns, the detachments organized “people’s verdicts” (*népitéletek*) and pogroms encouraging the local population to take an active part in the robbery and murders.³⁷ The Prónay Detachment alone killed between fifteen hundred and two thousand people and maimed, tortured, beat, and humiliated thousands more during the White Terror, especially in its first phase in the fall and winter of 1919. Assisted by the local authorities and police forces, which had usually made the arrests before the detachments’ arrival, the Prónay Battalion and other paramilitary groups also transported thousands into military prisons and hastily constructed internment camps. Hundreds of people were brutally tortured and killed en route

in 1919 and early 1920; thousands more died of malnutrition, overcrowding, poor hygienic conditions, and abuse at the hands of their captors in military and civilian prisons and the internment camps over the next two years.

Eager to settle accounts with its enemies, the Prónay Company changed its place of residence frequently during the counterrevolution. Never an urbanite, Prónay generally preferred villages and isolated farmsteads to cities; he and his men usually stayed on large estates where both food and fodder could be found in large quantities.³⁸ After Horthy's entry into Budapest on November 19, 1919, part of Prónay's unit, which had, meanwhile, grown to battalion size, was stationed in the small town of Dunaadony, while the rest moved into the Sandberg fortress in Komárom. In December 1919, Horthy, in anticipation of a leftist coup, transferred the entire battalion to the King Károly military base in Kelenföld in the outskirts of Budapest. In mid-1920, the minister of defense, István Stréter, moved the battalion to Pesthidegkút on the edge of the capital; in September, Prónay and his men were transported back to Budapest and placed in the Nádor military base in the Castle district. From January 1920, the hard core and elite of the battalion, the officers' company, was housed in the Hotel Britannia (Hotel Béke-Radison today, one block from the Western Railway Station); in September 1920, the officers moved to the Nádor military base. The second most important unit, the cavalry company, was stationed for the better part of 1920 on the farm of a Jewish agriculture entrepreneur in Homokszentmiklós, on the edge of the small town of Kunszentmiklós. The Jewish farmer visited the Ministry of Defense several times, asking for both compensation and the departure of the company. Finally in early 1921, his request was granted. The cavalry company then moved to the estate of Count Gyula Batthyány in Bicske. The commander himself, Prónay, lived in the Hotel Gellért from November 1919 to early 1920, when he set up residence in the Hotel Pannónia. The hotel and its café was a favorite meeting place of military officers and gentry administrators from distant counties, such as Ugocsa, Bereg, Szabolcs, and Szathmár, minor aristocrats and members of the gentry class.³⁹ In the summer of 1920 he moved from the Hotel Pannónia to the Hotel Bristol, yet he also kept a room in the Nándor military base. After his marriage in April 1921, he and his wife bought a house on Szentkirályi Street in the Third District of Budapest.⁴⁰ In the summer of 1921, he and his wife transferred their residence to Bicske to be close to the cavalry company.⁴¹

The unit's power continued to increase after arriving in the capital in the fall and winter of 1919. Prónay's officers guarded the Residence in Budapest from November 1919 and the Royal Castle in Gödöllő, where Regent Horthy liked to spend his free time. They frequently accompanied Horthy, Bethlen, Teleki, and other members of

the elite on trips and formed the honor guard at major events, including the reception of foreign dignitaries. Prónay's men continued to act as intelligence officers and border guards until early 1921. In the former capacity, they gained control over the main military prison on Margit Boulevard in Budapest (ironically, in 1919, both the Red and White militias used the same military prison to interrogate "high-value" inmates, thus foreshadowing the role that the building at Andrassy Street 60 played during the Second World War and its aftermath). After the Romanians' departure in November 1919, Prónay's officers patrolled the streets in the heavily Jewish seventh and eighth districts in Pest. They used the expansion of their policing to harass bystanders, blackmail business owners, and kidnap wealthy Jewish businessmen and professionals. As border guards and members of the criminal police, Prónay's men continued to detain alleged spies, smugglers, and blackmarketeers after November 1919. In general, they were more interested in stealing cars, motorcycles, gasoline, jewelry, foodstuff, and other valuables and in torturing Jews than in fighting corruption.⁴² Finally, Prónay, having gained access to Horthy, the chief of the General Staff and the Minister of War, continued to play the role of a political advisor—a function and privilege that he used with diminishing success to undermine the reputation of his conservative rivals, such as István Bethlen, and steer domestic and foreign policy in a more radical direction.

Because of his many functions and continued easy access to Horthy, Prónay remained a power factor in Hungary until the summer of 1921. His influence on political events remained marginal, however. Horthy and his closest advisors did read, with declining frequency, the intelligence reports prepared by Prónay's officers and replete with commentaries by the paramilitary leader himself. The admiral, in particular, seems to have taken an interest in rumors and juicy gossip about his colleagues' social background, family secrets, and sex life as passed on by these reports. Yet he never seems to have demoted anyone of import on the basis of Prónay's recommendations alone. Unlike the Soviet Cheka or the Nazi SS, the Prónay Battalion, equipped with police power, thus never became a state within the state: even at the height of its police power in early 1920, it did not control the state apparatus; it was not able to mold the selection of personnel, or set the agendas of the government. Nor did its influence increase over time: it had, in fact, begun to decline with the onset of political consolidation in 1920, until it completely disappeared with the marginalization of the unit in the summer 1921.

In the realm of foreign policy, especially when it came to the struggle against international Communism and the restoration of the old borders, Prónay usually sided with more radical elements of the right. Thus, with the knowledge and approval

of his superiors, including Admiral Horthy, his men tried to kidnap or poison Béla Kun and his closest advisors, who had been given asylum by the Social Democratic government in Austria after the collapse of the Soviet Republic in Hungary in early August 1919. The poorly planned mission failed, predictably, and the details leaked to the Austrian newspapers about the incident only brought further embarrassment and isolation to the holders of power in Budapest. On the other hand, Prónay's men did succeed in enticing over the border and then arresting a number of lower-ranked representatives of the defunct Soviet Republic, such as Béla Schön and László Szamuely, the brother of the Communist leader, Tibor Szamuely.⁴³ As member of the Gömbös-Kozma group of young officers, who continued to exercise considerable influence on Horthy in 1920, Prónay was also involved in ongoing negotiations with representatives of the German radical right. In the spring of 1920, Col. Otto Bauer, a Prussian officer and General Ludendorff's envoy, visited Budapest to convince the Hungarian government to participate in joint military action against Czechoslovakia and Austria. It was Prónay's responsibility to ensure the safety of the Colonel and his entourage. The direct talks between the Hungarian government and colonel Bauer, in which Prónay does not seem to have played an active or in any case a decisive role, soon stalled, however, because the parties failed to come to an agreement on what should happen to Austria after the conclusion of the military campaign. Prónay in his diary agreed with Horthy's conservative advisors that the *Anschluss* was not in Hungary's interests in 1920. Instead of forming an alliance with the German radical right, he wanted to strengthen ties with Austrian conservatives and Polish nationalists.⁴⁴

The danger of tying Hungarian foreign policy to that of Germany was one of those issues on which Prónay saw eye to eye with Horthy's conservative advisors. However, with regard to the goals, the timing, and the means of revisionism, that is, the actions to be taken against the neighboring states to recover territories lost after the First World War, he and his friends in the militias and patriotic associations parted ways with the conservatives. In 1919 and early 1920, Horthy still shared the radicals' desire for early restoration of the country's historical borders and was also inclined to listen to their often phantasmagorical plans to do so, in the face of Western opposition and the overwhelming military power of the neighboring states, by force. By the summer of 1920, however, the regent and his conservative advisors had realized that saber rattling was not productive, and that military adventures would only lead to foreign occupation and prolonged diplomatic isolation. Prónay and the radicals in the patriotic organizations, as a sign of continued radicalization, did not share the assessment of the situation by conservatives such as Bethlen. At

the end of July 1920, a squad of the Prónay Battalion, led by First Lt. Iván Héjjas, robbed, in collusion with Austrian gendarme and army units, an armed depot in the town of Fürstenfeld.⁴⁵ The head of the District Military Command in Budapest, Lt. Gen. (altábornagy) Béla Dány, may have signed off on the plan; almost certainly, however, Prónay did not share the information with the Ministry of Defense and the office of Regent Horthy. The raid yielded more than three thousand weapons, including thirty machine guns, and a large amount of ammunition. The military matériel was then transported to the village of Izsák, and, reminiscent of the methods used by the German Freikorps, hidden from both the Entente observers and the Hungarian authorities in haystacks and stables or stored in cellars and attics on the Nádor military base in Budapest. Despite repeated requests from the authorities, Prónay refused to hand over the weapons to the minister of defense.⁴⁶ A year later, in early fall of 1921, insurgents from the Hungarian Plain would use the same weapons to prevent the formal annexation of Western Hungary (today's Burgenland) and revise the postwar treaty that awarded the territory to Austria.

The raid unnerved the political and military elite, which became, for the first time, concerned about the possibility of a right-wing coup. Iván Héjjas had, indeed, made a few senseless remarks, which were immediately picked up by the liberal newspapers; however, no evidence has been found to suggest that he or Prónay ever planned a coup. His and his followers seem to have been primarily concerned with the restoration of the borders. Thus Prónay and one of his fellow militia leaders, Capt. Kálmán Rácz, began to make preparations for an attack on Czechoslovakia, scheduled to take place in December, soon after the successful conclusion of the raid.⁴⁷ Having learned about the planned attack in November, Prime Minister Pál Teleki immediately dispatched two of "the twelve captains" to talk sense into the militia leader. They told Prónay that Horthy opposed their plan and that, if he and his associates did not desist, the Hungarian government would notify its Czechoslovak counterpart about the planned invasion. Prónay paid a visit to Horthy immediately; the regent then explained to him that an unprovoked attack on Czechoslovakia could lead to foreign occupation and the loss of additional territories. In the end, the frustrated Prónay was forced to call off the attack.⁴⁸

The successful armed robbery not only raised the specter of a right-wing coup; it led to a rapid increase in violence in the capital as well. At the same time, legitimist politicians began to fear that Horthy would use the anti-Habsburg militias, such as the Prónay-Héjjas Detachment, to prevent the return of the king. Thus, in the spring and summer of 1920 they organized a press campaign against Prónay's right-hand man, Iván Héjjas. Also in the spring, Prónay was dragged into court on the charge

that during the war he had mistreated a Jewish ensign. Simultaneously, Liberal and Christian Socialist deputies and the members of the peasant Smallholders' Party started to speak out openly and en masse in parliament against paramilitary violence. They went so far as to demand the dissolution of the paramilitary units and the most militant of all patriotic associations, the Alliance of Awakening Hungarians (Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete Szövetsége, or ÉME). Horthy and his advisors, however, still counted on the paramilitary units, especially the more professional Prónay and Ostenburg battalions, in their fights against the Social Democratic Party and working-class organizations. In 1920, the elite still needed the militias to demonstrate power, defend the borders, and exploit international crises in order to regain at least some of the lost territories. The legitimists were also not sincere in their demand to dissolve all paramilitary groups. After all, they also had their own militias, which they needed to restore the Habsburg king to his throne.

Although the paramilitary groups and patriotic associations had many friends and supporters, during the counterrevolution they also had acquired many enemies. After early 1920, the calls for dissolving the militias gained strength. On March 14, 1920, the new prime minister, Sándor Simonyi-Semadam, read a letter of Count Albert Apponyi to the parliament, in which the head of the Hungarian delegation warned of the negative impact that paramilitary violence would have on the outcome of peace negotiations. On June 4, the government announced that in future it would take the state of emergency, which had been in effect since the collapse of the Soviet Republic in August 1919, more seriously, and would punish violators accordingly. One June 8, Iván Héjjas, at Prónay's prompting, gave an interview to the nationalist newspapers, in which he threatened the parliament. Although there is no evidence that that Héjjas or Prónay ever wanted to follow through (Héjjas's warning most likely expressed the general frustration that the public felt toward the parliament), the government, in the aftermath of the Kapp Putsch in Germany, did not want to take chances. On June 9, the Council of the Ministers dissolved all paramilitary groups, with the exception of the Prónay and the Ostenburg battalions. A few days later, the government limited the power of the two remaining units to arrest, interrogation, and prolonged detention of civilians.⁴⁹ The minister of defense also sought to downsize the Prónay Battalion by discharging reserve officers; Prónay, with the help of Horthy, was able to delay the execution of the plan, however.⁵⁰ Simultaneously, the government decided to launch an investigation into the affairs of the ÉME, the most violent of all patriotic associations, with an eye to its possible dissolution. In mid-June, it promised to look into the atrocities that had been committed in Kecskemét and vicinity since August 1919. To take the edge off this promise, Horthy, however,

appointed Prónay as the head of the commission charged with the investigation. Knowing that nothing would happen to them, local officials, many of whom had been directly involved in the atrocities, received Prónay and his commission with open arms.⁵¹ Since the Héjjas Detachment had closely cooperated with Prónay for months, and many of its members, including Lieutenant Héjjas himself, had later been members of the Prónay Battalion, the investigation and the cleansing campaign predictably produced meager results. In the end, the regular army and police units arrested fifty-four people; very few of the detainees, however, had been members of the Héjjas militia, which had been responsible for the murders, kidnappings, and robberies.⁵² “It was all theater,” the astute young officer, Kálmán Shvoy, noted in his diary.⁵³

Prónay may have saved the Héjjas militia in the summer of 1920; however, he could not reverse the trend toward political consolidation. The stabilization of the country gained new momentum after the appointment of Count Pál Teleki as prime minister in July 19, 1920. Teleki, even though a radical anti-Semite, disapproved of pogroms and violence. He used the raiding of Club Café on Lipót Avenue (today’s Saint Stephen Avenue) on July 27, 1920, by an anti-Semitic mob, the beating up of its mainly Jewish clientele, and the murder of two upper-middle-class professionals, as an excuse to declare war on the radical groups. The parliament was outraged; even Lóránt Hegedűs, the president of the Association of Banks and Saving Banks, spoke out in favor of swift justice to restore business confidence.⁵⁴ The government this time did not drag its feet. The police quickly arrested the perpetrators; they were tried and six received heavy prison sentences in mid-August.⁵⁵ In the same month, the minister of justice introduced draft legislation (which was passed into law in March 1921) which gave the government the power to arrest dangerous individuals and dissolve organizations deemed a threat to law and order.⁵⁶ In early November, as a response to renewed paramilitary and mob violence in Budapest, the government resorted to even stricter measures. The new wave of violence, which culminated in the murder of a police officer and the wounding of his colleague, outraged the military and political elite. Since the perpetrators (all Héjjas’s men, who had chosen Hotel Britannia as their headquarters) stood under Prónay’s protection, the government decide to proceed with care. Regent Horthy sent his confidant, Capt. Lajos Fischer, to Prónay, before the planned government crackdown. He asked the militia leader, who was having dinner in the Hotel Hungaria, if his men would put up any resistance. Prónay promised to remain neutral; however, he also made sure that he would be present at the raid and would be allowed to vouch for, and thus save, more than a dozen officers, including his lieutenant, Iván Héjjas, who was allowed to

leave the building as a free man.⁵⁷ Still, the crackdown continued: the same evening, government troops occupied the Ferenc Deák, Berlin, and Savoy hotels, arresting at least fifty officers, noncommissioned officers, and armed civilians. In the early hours of the following day, November 12, government troops besieged the Ehmann military base in Mátyásföld, which housed the rank-and-file of the Babarczy and Hir detachments. The skirmish lasted for hours and left a number of insurgent and government troops dead and wounded; in the end, government troops occupied the base and arrested the survivors. As part of the mopping-up operation, the following day, the police detained one hundred people in the capital alone.⁵⁸

The offensive dealt a serious blow to Prónay's prestige; it weakened his power base and cast doubt on his ability to keep the militia movement together. By early 1921, time was clearly running out for the paramilitary groups. After February 21, 1921, the Prónay and the Ostenburg battalions no longer stood under military supervision, but were reconstituted as gendarme units. The goal of the government was to protect the two reliable units from the wrath of the Entente powers and mislead both the Western and neighboring states about the real strength of the Hungarian armed forces. Yet it was also rumored that the regime might restructure or dissolve the two battalions. Prónay, who had always been good at picking up rumors, seem to have had no illusions about the political elite's intentions. The appointment of István Bethlen as prime minister on April 14, 1921, only increased his distrust. Bethlen often spoke the language of the radical right; his actions, which moved the country even more toward consolidation, reflected conservative liberal and conservative authoritarian convictions.⁵⁹ Prónay despised the man, whom he rightly suspected of trying to marginalize him politically. Prónay's marriage to Countess Alméé Pálffy-Daun, lady-in-waiting to Queen Zita, the wife of King Charles, in April 1921, an event which neither Horthy nor any other members of the political elite had attended, both testified to the existence of, and widened, the political and emotional distance between the paramilitary leader and the Horthy's supporters. A beautiful woman with political ambitions, Countess Pálffy-Daun came to exercise a strong influence on the increasingly frustrated Prónay. By late spring 1921, rumors began to circulate about Prónay's alleged legitimist connections. The rumors were likely not true; yet they did express the growing alienation of the paramilitary leader from the regime. Bethlen clearly wanted to get rid of him. The issue for him therefore was not, as it had been for Horthy, how to save but rather how to dispose of Prónay; how to gain political advantage, both at home and abroad, from his dismissal, without, however, losing his men and provoking a backlash in the form of a military coup.

The so-called Kornhauser Affair provided the much sought after answer to these problems. The affair itself was trivial. Lajos Kornhauser, a Jewish businessman, rented the lime mine in the village of Alsópetény where Prónay's brother, Mihály, was the largest landowner. He was allegedly in arrears for about seventy thousand koronas on his lease, which he owed both to the village community and to Prónay's brother. Since Mihály was childless, Prónay, who expected to inherit both his brother's land and his share in the mine, thought that he had to "do something." He had Kornhauser arrested and interrogated and physically abused by officers in the Nádor military base in early July 1921. In search of her husband, Kornhauser's distraught wife, accompanied by her relatives, paid a visit to the Liberal leader, Vilmos Vázsonyi, who in turn raised the issue of the businessman's illegal arrest and torture with the prime minister. Bethlen immediately contacted the interior minister, Count Gedeon Ráday, and the head of the gendarmes, Count Csáky, who, in turn, by phone ordered Kornhauser's release. Prónay was sent on leave for a month and command over his unit was given to his deputy, Captain Rantzenberger.

Prónay had committed more serious crimes and had, thanks to Horthy's support, always been able to escape prosecution. But times had changed since August 1919. The case dragged on for two months, and at every stage of the crisis, Prónay dug himself deeper into his self-made hole. He behaved outrageously during his meetings with Prime Minister Bethlen and other members of his cabinet, accusing them of every possible "crime" from corruption and backstabbing to spying for foreign governments, membership in Freemason lodges and, most importantly, being in the pockets of Jews. He reminded Bethlen and his colleagues that they owed their power and "cushy jobs" to him alone, and that he could take them away. When contradicted, he simply stood up and stormed out of the meetings, slamming the door behind him. In the end, Horthy, who seems to have acted as an intermediary, while in fact doing Bethlen's bidding, was able to convince Prónay to resign from his position as battalion leader and hand over command to his deputy until the investigation into the Kornhauser Affair had been completed. In return for his compliance, Prónay expected the government to put an end to the press campaign against him and keep politicians in parliament at bay. The government, as Prónay saw it, failed to live up to its promise: not only did the campaign continue, but legitimist politicians also raised in parliament the issue of militia violence, calling his men, such as Héjjas, common killers and robbers and demanding an investigation into their crimes. Unable to convince Horthy during his audience in early August that what had happened was a violation of a gentlemen's agreement, Prónay sent, immediately after his return from his visit, a threatening letter to the speaker of the

parliament, the legitimist politician, István Rakovszky. The letter was made public, creating uproar in parliament. Simultaneously, Prónay publically accused the minister of defense, Sándor Belitska, of illegal trade in cars. The charge not only failed to stick, but made Prónay vulnerable to prosecution for libel against his superior. The new scandals played right into the hands of Bethlen, who had wanted to get rid of Prónay all along, but who also needed his troops. On August 28, 1921, Prónay was forced to resign from the National Army, allegedly to satisfy public opinion. All that Prónay was able to get in return for his resignation was a vague promise, in writing, by Bethlen that he would be reinstated after the political storm passed—a promise that the prime minister most likely did not plan to honor.⁶⁰

Nationalist Uprising in Burgenland and the Legitimist Coup

After his resignation from the National Army, Prónay returned to the estate of his friend Gyula Batthyány in the village of Bicske, where the cavalry company of his battalion was stationed. He and his wife rented a farmhouse and waited for further developments. On September 3, the Kornhauser case was tried in a military court in Budapest. Prónay received a symbolic, ten-day prison sentence. He was relieved that the prosecutor indicted him on the lesser charge of abuse of power rather than corruption. Conviction on the charge of corruption would have meant that he could no longer duel or act as a second—which is perhaps the worst thing that could happen to a gentleman, he confided to his diary.⁶¹

The Kornhauser Affair, nevertheless, had dealt a serious blow to Prónay's power and self-esteem. During the summer, as his relations with the Horthy elite reached their nadir, Prónay revived his idea of emigrating to Latin America or joining the Polish army fighting the invading Red Army. By early September, however, he had overcome his depression and let himself be persuaded to join the nationalist insurrection in Burgenland. Since the details of the uprising are well known, for the lack of space, I am going to give only a short summary of the events.⁶² The treaties of St. Germain in September 1919 and of Trianon in June 1920 awarded the ethnically mixed but predominantly German area of Western Hungary, which had been part of the Kingdom of Saint Stephen for a thousand years, to Austria. Since no Western interest was directly involved, and Austrian politicians and the public at large were not particularly eager to claim the province as their own, the Hungarians suspected the hand of “perfidious” Czech politicians such as Eduard Beneš behind the deal; they believed that, by handing the land over to Austria, the Czechs wanted to sow

the seeds of hatred between their neighboring states.⁶³ In June 1921, the Entente powers called on the Hungarian government to evacuate the disputed region, but the surviving paramilitary groups and patriotic associations, such as the League for the Protection of Territorial Integrity, the Etelköz Alliance (Etelközi Szövetség, or EKSz), ÉME, and MOVE decided to resist the handover of land that they considered an integral part of Hungary. During the summer, university students, civil servants, young professionals, children of wealthy peasants, military and gendarme officers and noncommissioned officers, and war veterans—organized or soon-to-be organized into paramilitary groups—flooded the region. The insurgents were moved by patriotism and an injured sense of national pride; however, at least some of them, especially Héjjas's men from the Plain, also sought to escape justice (in early summer, the Bethlen government had appointed a new prosecutor to look into the atrocities committed in Kecskemét and vicinity since 1919).⁶⁴ Many sought loot, while others wanted to prolong their carefree and exciting former life-style as soldiers and militia men. With financial aid and weapons, the Hungarian government secretly supported the uprising, which, in any case, it was in no position to prevent. In early August, disturbed by the news of robberies and the harassment of native Germans and Croats by the insurgents, it also dispatched the Prónay and Ostenburg battalions to restore and maintain order in the troubled region.

Deeply suspicious of Prónay but knowing that they could not keep the meddlesome paramilitary leader out of Western Hungary for long, Bethlen and Horthy entrusted him with the command of the irregular troops (thus leaving his old battalion, as well as the troops under the control of Captain Ostenburg and the ex-Prime Minister, István Friedrich, independent) in early September. Since this was not an official appointment, and because he had officially retired from the army, Prónay arrived in Sopron on the evening train from Budapest on September 6 as a private man. Officially, he assumed the leadership over the insurgents ten days later.⁶⁵ Angry at the regime, he was not in the mood to take orders from Budapest or accept any limitations on his power. With the exception of Friedrich's unit, which joined him in October, by the end of September he had extended his control over every group. In September, the insurgents engaged and defeated the demoralized Austrian regular and irregular forces in a number of skirmishes. As a result of these victories, all of Western Hungary had come under Hungarian control by the end of the month.⁶⁶

Emboldened by this success, Prónay convened a constituent assembly, which declared the province independent of both Austria and Hungary and elected him as the provincial governor (*bán*) of a new state, the Regency of Leitha (Lajta Bánság) on October 4, 1921. Thus began one of the strangest postwar experiments, similar

in many respects to the adventures of Gabriele d'Annunzio and his protofascists in the town of Fiume, and to the conquest and control of the Baltic states by German Freikorps units after the war. The more immediate cause of the insurgency, and the closest model for the new state, was provided by the proclamation of the Serbo-Hungarian Republic of Baranya-Baja in Pécs on August 14, 1921, by a group of Hungarian leftist radicals who had found refuge in the Serbian-controlled southwestern counties after the collapse of the Soviet Republic. The new republic did not exist for long, however. At the end of August, the Hungarian government, with the support of the Western powers, which had awarded the region to Hungary in the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, simply reannexed the coal-rich Pécs-Baranya triangle.⁶⁷ Paradoxically, Prónay, who had prided himself on his conservative principles and hatred of Bolshevism, had been emboldened by, and tried to imitate the example of, his political enemies. Like the leftist revolutionaries, he also sought to permanently cut ties between his new state and Hungary.⁶⁸ His motives are difficult to ascertain: the desire to avenge himself on Bethlen and Horthy, to recapture the headlines and replay the counterrevolution with himself, rather than Horthy, in the main role most likely played a more important role in his decision than any concern for the fate of this ethnically mixed region. Prónay and his men cited Bolshevism (Austria was ruled by Social Democrats) and the chaos caused by the failure of the government in Vienna to organize effective local governments and maintain law and order in the detached territories as a rationale for their actions.⁶⁹ They also appealed to the principle of national self-determination as championed by President Wilson in his famous Fourteen Points during the war. The new government published its orders in three languages (Hungarian, German, and Croat) and promised equality to the citizens irrespective of ethnic background. It organized a police force, printed stamps, and designed a new coat-of-arms for the state and a new uniform for the army. Like Horthy two years earlier, Prónay, as the provisional *bán*, threatened, in his edicts, to execute (*felkoncol*, literally to put someone to the end of his sword) anyone who opposed his new regime. He also began to develop, on Horthy's model, his personality cult, putting his image on stamps and displaying it on placards and official portraits.⁷⁰

No one was impressed by these measures; the European governments failed to recognize the new ministate. Bethlen and Horthy, however, were infuriated, and began to cut aid to the region. The continued chaos did make an impact on the Western powers, especially France and Italy, states which were, in any case, not particularly well-disposed toward Austria and had only marginal interest in the final shape of the borders between the two states. To end the chaos, the Entente decided to revisit

the problem of borders between the two loser states. With Italy as a mediator, diplomats from the two countries met in Venice on October 13 to work out a compromise: Austria was allowed to annex two-thirds of the region's territory. However, the fate of the town of Sopron and the villages in its environs was to be decided in a referendum held later that year. In return for this concession, Hungary promised to remove its troops, the militias included, from the region by early November.⁷¹

The government in Budapest saw the Venice Agreement as a great success: for the first time, it was able to exploit disagreements among the Western states and their lack of interest in the region, to change the provisions of the Treaty of Trianon. The insurgents, Prónay in particular were less pleased. While they were eager to take credit for the concessions made in Venice, they also hoped to keep more territories under Hungarian control. Withdrawal of troops also promised to spell an end to the existence of the Regency of Leitha and to Prónay's role as its governor (and thus one of Horthy's equals). Eager to perpetuate his power, Prónay dragged his feet for the next two weeks. Bethlen and Horthy wrote long letters to Prónay in mid-October. They cajoled, tried to talk sense into, and appealed to his patriotic sentiments, but all in vain: Prónay continued to cling to power. The Hungarian government was forced to resort to more stringent measures. It promised to cut off aid completely and warned civil servants that they would be fired from their jobs, students would lose a semester, and military officers and noncommissioned officers would be court-martialed if they did not leave the region immediately. Bethlen even threatened to use army troops loyal to the government to dislodge the militias from the disputed territory. Neither the carrot nor the stick approach seem to have worked at first, however: in a letter written to Bethlen on October 19, 1921, Prónay still refused to call off the insurgency.⁷²

The Venice Agreement and the Hungarian government's determination to enforce its provisions put Prónay in a very precarious position. The threats issued by the regime in Budapest moved the frustrated paramilitary leader closer to the legitimists. The rapprochement, however, was for both parties fraught with danger. Prónay was considered one of the most fanatical supporters of Horthy and an opponent of the Habsburg cause. During the first legitimist coup in April 1921, his men had arrested half a dozen legitimist politicians, and he allegedly planned to do the same with the king. In the summer, he had challenged Ödön Beniczky, perhaps one of the leading legitimist politicians, to a duel and, as mentioned earlier, had sent a threatening letter to the legitimist speaker of parliament, István Rakovszky. In September, he had Colonel Lehár, a war hero and the most important legitimist officer, detained for a week; he most likely would have had him assassinated had

it not been for the huge uproar in elite circles and for the timely intervention of his friend, Gyula Ostenburg, and his temporary ally, the also legitimist commissar of Western Hungary, Count Antal Sigray. The legitimists distrusted Prónay and most likely failed to involve him in their plan to exploit the crisis in Western Hungary to restore Charles to the throne. Exactly when and how Prónay learned about the coming of the second legitimist coup remains unclear; it is unlikely that the legitimists were able to keep him completely in the dark, or that they had wanted to. He may have made a gentleman's agreement either with Ostenburg or with Count Sigray sometime between October 17 and October 19, to remain neutral in the case of a coup. What he expected in return for his betrayal of Horthy remains unknown. One thing is certain, however: no matter what they promised, the legitimists would not have forgiven Prónay nor would they have kept him in his position as the head of a ministate. Like his nemesis, Colonel Lehár, he would have been driven into exile or, had he refused to leave, would have been prosecuted for crimes committed during the White Terror.

There is, unfortunately, no room here to discuss the detail of the second legitimist coup; suffice it to say that the coup was poorly prepared and was doomed to failure from the start.⁷³ The king's arrival on October 19, 1921, infuriated the Hungarian government. Horthy refused to hand over power; the Entente demanded Charles's expulsion, while the neighboring states promised to get involved militarily if necessary to prevent the restoration of the last Habsburg king to his throne. Charles proved to be indecisive as well; he wasted too much time giving speeches, receiving delegations, and gathering his troops in Transdanubia. Meanwhile the government in Budapest recovered from the initial shock; regular army units and paramilitary groups made up of university students and MOVE and ÉME members mobilized by the ever-busy Gömbös, defeated the legitimist forces at the Battle of Budaörs on October 23 and 24, 1921. The defeat of the coup, in turn, sealed the fate of the king. He had been first asked to resign on behalf of his son, but refused. As a result, on November 6, parliament deprived the last Habsburg of the Hungarian crown.⁷⁴

On October 19, soon after he heard about the king's arrival, Prónay dispatched his wife, Countess Pálffy-Daun, to negotiate with Count Sigray. The next few days he deliberately ignored Bethlen's and Horthy's plea to come to the aid of their beleaguered regime. At least he was smart enough to congratulate his one-time friend, Horthy, on the victory of his troops. Significantly, it was not Horthy but one of his underlings who curtly responded to his letter.⁷⁵ By October 25, 1921, Prónay had found himself in a new and much more uncomfortable position. Blinded by hatred and ambition during the entire affair, he failed to take his men's sentiments and

material interests into consideration. The majority of people who flooded into Burgenland in the summer of 1921 were legitimist, although only a minority supported the restoration of Charles to the throne. The members of his former unit, the Prónay (now Ranzenberger) Battalion, and the men under the command of Iván Héjjas and Árpád Taby, both of whom owed their careers to the paramilitary leader, followed Prónay's alienation from the Horthy group and his flirtation with the legitimists with growing concern. Many insurgents were Protestant, and thus traditionally anti-Habsburg and anti-Austrian. The rebels tended to be young and upwardly mobile men eager to restore their family fortunes and make a career in Hungary rather than in the stillborn state of the Lajta Bánság. Very few were prepared to lose their jobs or endanger their university careers for Prónay. His refusal to come to Horthy's aid during the legitimist coup forced them to take stand against their leader. Prónay's forces quickly melted away; his old battalion openly abandoned him, and even Héjjas and his men left their posts without Prónay's permission to defend the government during the coup. Thus, by the end of October, Prónay had lost his most reliable and best trained troops. Cut off from aid, without which the remaining militias could not survive the winter, Prónay had to make a deal with his protagonists in Budapest. In the company of his most trusted men, who continued to remain on his side—Army Bishop István Zadravecz, Károly Pröhle, Aurél Héjjas, and Father Lajos Bónis "Archangel"—he met Horthy on October 31. At this meeting, the regent and his one-time friend and supporter worked out a deal: Prónay pledged to remove all his remaining troops from the region by November 6; Horthy, in return, promised full amnesty for the crimes committed since August 1919. Thus, on November 4, 1921, the history of Lajta Bánság officially came to an end, as the *bán* and his followers had left the region. Over the next three weeks, the Hungarian army arrested more than two thousand insurgents who had either nowhere to go or simply refused to follow orders. Their arrest and deportation finally opened the way for the peaceful development of the region.⁷⁶

The End of Prónay's Political Career

The military and political elite gave Prónay and his men a hero's welcome after their return in Budapest in early November. Horthy also kept his promise: at the end of November he issued his famous amnesty order, which put an end to ongoing investigations into militia crimes and forbade the opening of new cases, unless the defendants were accused of robbery and theft. The Horthy elite, Bethlen included,

were prepared to overlook Prónay's behavior during the legitimist coup. Horthy and his advisors still planned to integrate Prónay into the evolving counterrevolutionary regime by offering him a job of his choice, or if he no longer wanted to serve in the army, a *vitéz* (gallant) title and land. There was one thing that they were not willing to do, however: they refused to return him to his battalion. Not surprisingly, Prónay rejected the elite's generous job offers. Always fiercely independent, he resented the fact that "they wanted to drive me, who had left the National Army as a deputy colonel, back to the sheep's corral and then use military laws and regulations available to them to turn me into a meek kid."⁷⁷ He declared that he had no use for any amnesty order since he had never committed any crime, and he demanded an army investigation to be launched into his behavior during the Lajta adventure and the second legitimist coup. He wanted to clear his name and at the same time punish the officers who had disobeyed his orders during the second coup.

Horthy and the elite obliged. As expected, the committee that had been set up for this purpose declared that Prónay had not committed any impropriety during the coup. It added, however, that he should not be restored to his former position as battalion commander. For the next nine months, Prónay continued to harass Horthy; Bethlen; Belitska, the minister of defense; and Pál Nagy, the supreme commander of the army, over this issue. He wanted his battalion back, at least for a few weeks to settle scores with the officers who had disobeyed his orders. His insistence was a mistake; it only made him look weak, petty, and ridiculous. Frustrated by the results of the investigation, which, in fact, had ruled in his favor, he challenged first the chair of the committee, the elderly Lt. Gen. János Sávoly, and then fifteen other individuals, including a dozen of his former officers, to duels. At the same time, he told everyone who cared to listen that Horthy and Bethlen were not gentlemen because they had failed to honor their promise to reinstate him as battalion commander. He also spread the rumor that the powerful patriotic association, the EKSz, had been behind the rebellion of his officers during the second legitimist coup, and provoked its "visible head," Baron Feilitsch, to a duel. When the duel failed to materialize on the often-cited grounds that no offense had been given or intended to be given, Prónay left the EKSz on March 1, 1922. The secret organization, in turn, officially expelled him as a member on March 9.

His departure from the EKSz marked a new low point in Prónay's political career, from which he was never able to recover. On February 21, 1922, Prónay was elected deputy chairman of the ÉME. Typically, in his acceptance speech, he accused the government and the parliament of being soft on Jews. His speech was frequently interrupted by cries from the audience: "They should be killed within

24 hours! Long live the pogrom!”⁷⁸ The idea of Prónay entering this radical patriotic association came from his one-time lieutenant and ÉME stalwart, Iván Héjjas. Prónay, most likely, wanted to use his new position to rebuild his power base and compensate for the loss of his battalion. Simultaneously with his election as deputy chairman, he also assumed responsibility for rebuilding the intelligence and militia branch (*nemzetvédelmi osztály*) of the ÉME. While on paper a good choice, his entry into the ÉME leadership in practice proved to be a mistake. Prónay, as an officer and aristocrat, soon felt alienated in the company of journalists, lawyers, engineers—men, in his opinion, of lowly origins and questionable character. Although it failed to produce the political dividends desired, his entry into the leadership of the protofascist organization did not go unnoticed, however: the years 1922 and 1923 witnessed a spectacular increase in terrorist attacks by ÉME radicals on Jewish clubs and cafés and on foreign embassies, for example. In public, Prónay vehemently denied that he had anything to do with the attacks. Since the ÉME was a collection of independent and semi-independent cells, he, most likely, did not plan every assault. There can be no doubt, however, that he provided inspiration, had foreknowledge of, and approved the attacks on Jews.

In the spring and summer of 1922, his relations with Horthy, the military elite, and the Bethlen government elite continued to deteriorate. In June, when he visited Horthy in the Royal Castle in Gödöllő for the last time, the regent told him point blank that his complaints and accusations had been unjustified, and thus cut the audience short. Meanwhile, surviving militias still loyal to Prónay, which had spent the winter and the spring in hiding in villages and noble estates at the southern edge of Lake Fertő, were preparing for a new attack on Austria in the summer. Led by Capt. Miklós Budaházy, György Hir, and the Franciscan monk, Father Lajos Bónis “Archangel,” all Prónay’s lieutenants, they planned to invade Burgenland and reestablish the Regency of Leitha. The plan was leaked to the government, and the alarmed Police Chief Imre Nádossy quickly mobilized the gendarmes and disarmed the insurgents. Still, some of the rebels were able to cross the border into Austria where they were arrested by the Austrian rural police. Prónay typically blamed the failure of the coup on Gömbös, who, he believed, had betrayed the plan to the government. To settle this and previous grievances, Prónay challenged the MOVE leader Gömbös to a duel in August. The duel did not take place, however, for the same reason that Prónay had not been able to fight Lieutenant General Sávolgy and Police Chief Nádassy in the spring: the committee that had been set up to look into the matter found that his honor had not been violated.

At the end of 1922, Prónay met the Russian White Army leader General Wrangel in Belgrade and offered him his services. The offer was never taken up; however, the idea to fight the Red Army stayed with Prónay for the next two decades, to be realized only during the last stage of his life. Prónay spent the interwar years refighting old battles and seeking revenge on people who he believed had wronged him during the Kornhauser Affair and the second legitimist coup. The list of people he challenged to duels was long. In 1923, Prime Minister Bethlen was forced to respond to the libel that he was a liar because he had not honored his promise to reinstate Prónay as the commander of his unit. To protect his reputation, especially among young officers, the foxy Bethlen challenged Prónay to a duel. The story kept the public in suspense for a short while, mainly because of the power and the names of the people directly or indirectly involved: the seconds included such famous men as Baron György Prónay, Count Károly Csáky, Baron Mihály Láng, Count Endre Bésán-Jankovics, Vice Admiral Emil Konek and Col. Andor Abonyi. The famous and controversial war general, Baron Sándor Szurmay, chaired the committee. Bethlen had no intention of going through with the fight, however; he only wanted to humiliate Prónay. As expected, the committee decided in the prime minister's favor. Its verdict stated that Bethlen had not been in the position to restore Prónay as battalion commander and because his accusation was baseless, the paramilitary leader had to issue a public apology. Prónay was not prepared to prostrate himself before his archenemy, however. Fuming with anger that the crafty Bethlen, once again, beat him at his own game, he continued to protest the honor committee's decision.⁷⁹

In early 1924, Prónay dragged his ex-officers, including Victor (Győző) Rantzenberger, Árpád Taby, and others to court on the charge of embezzling the battalion's money during his absence. In early March, he was scheduled to fight a duel with Maj. László Magasházy; the duel did not take place, however, because the honor committee had learned that one of Prónay's seconds, Dr. Vilmos Rácz, had a brush with the law in the past, which disqualified him as an aide. The problem was soon fixed and a new second appointed; then, however, Magasházy simply skipped town shortly before the scheduled duel, leaving the angry militia leader completely humiliated.⁸⁰ In 1925, Prónay also had an altercation with Maj. Jenő Rantzenberger in the National Riding School; publicly he called the General Staff officer "a pig" and "ugly face" (*ronda fráter*). This time around Prónay would have succeeded had he been not so eager (he wanted a pistol duel with each party firing three shots, followed by a sword fight if they were still standing). Rantzenberger and the honor committee wisely rejected the conditions as both inappropriate and too dangerous; hence the duel did not take place.⁸¹ Three years later, in 1928, Prónay thrashed his

ex-deputy Victor Ranzenberger with his walking stick on an open street in Budapest. Prónay told the police that he would have shot him dead, but he had to take the interests of “people higher up into consideration; I also needed him to shed light on whatever happened to the battalion’s money.”⁸²

In 1929, Prónay minted commemorative coins to celebrate the insurrection in Western Hungary. The coins were made in the Royal Hungarian Mint without, however, the permission of the government. The first coins were distributed among the veterans of the insurgency in the Officers’ Casino in Budapest on August 19, 1929. The presence of hundreds of ex-fighters from dozens of villages and towns attracted media attention. Horthy learned about the illegally minted coins and the celebration from the newspapers. The government ordered an investigation and, in the end, admonished the director of the mint, Samu Michaelis, for not following procedures. Eager to not alienate the provincial elite, however, the prime minister’s office failed to proscribe the coins. Elated by the decision, Prónay traveled the country, distributing his coins among veterans and friends during the next two years. He meticulously recorded the names and addresses of the recipients, which led the authorities to conclude that his goal was to recruit volunteers for future adventures.⁸³

In 1930, he dragged Jenő Ranzenberger, Count Hermann Salm and Capt. György Görgey, his closest friends in Horthy’s entourage, to court again on issues related to the second legitimist coup. The same year, on the recommendation of his one-time friend and rival, Gyula Gömbös, who had been state secretary in the Ministry of Defense since 1928, Prónay was re-admitted into the National Army. By then, however, at age fifty-seven, he had lost interest in a military career. In any case, Baron Prónay, for whom soldiering had been more a passion than a job, would have felt alienated in the more professional, and at the same time more egalitarian and petit-bourgeois, interwar army than in his old hussar units. After his departure from the army, he spent his waking hours at horse races and gambling tables in the officers’ casinos, restaurants, and the clubs of radical right organizations. His name came up in connection with the failed right-wing coup organized by his former officer, László Vannay, in 1932, but he was not charged with any wrongdoing. During a trial involving Victor Ranzenberger in the same year, he lost his temper and stormed out of the courtroom. In the end, he received a six-month sentence, which he most likely did not serve, and was forced to pay a fine. His name continued to be mentioned periodically in the tabloids and the domestic news sections of the newspapers throughout the 1930s, but always in connection with scandals usually involving him screaming anti-Semitic abuses in public. In the second half of the 1930s and early 1940s, the Hungarian government, in particular its intelligence

branch, the Center of National Security (Államvédelmi Központ ÁVK), continued to observe him and his wife, who was rumored to have had an affair with the Italian foreign minister and Mussolini's son-in-law, Ciano, and the Italian ambassador (in that order). But they were seen more as allies than potential enemies. Mrs. Prónay, for example, was used by the ÁVK to feed the Italian embassy with false information. Described by the ÁVK as a highly intelligent and fashionable woman, she also provided the Foreign Ministry with reliable information about Italian foreign and domestic policy in the early 1940s.⁸⁴ Clearly, the ÁVK did not see Prónay as a very dangerous man; the threat he posed was eclipsed by the far graver menace represented by the fascist parties, especially by the increasingly popular Arrow Cross, which maintained close contact with the Nazi SS. Prónay knew and sympathized with the Arrow Cross leader, Ferenc Szálasi, and his movement; however, he does not seem to have played any significant role in his party or any other fascist groups.

The aging Prónay welcomed the Second World War as an opportunity to settle scores with the Freemasons and the Jews who, he was convinced, pulled all the strings in Britain and the United States. He supported the German alliance from the start and was frustrated by what he saw as the double dealings of the Hungarian government both before and especially during the war.⁸⁵ It is unclear what role if any he played in Szálasi's seizure of power in October 1944. He was, however, among the first to congratulate him on his victory and offer his services. On October 15, 1944, he and his ex-officer, László Vannay, discussed with Emil Kovarcz, a member of the Szálasi cabinet, the possibility of setting up of fifteen hundred men. In November 1944, the minister of war, Károly Beregfy, authorized the creation of special units under the command of Lt. Gen. Ferenc Czyedner Feketehalmi. Szálasi had only recently rehabilitated Feketehalmi, who committed war crimes as the head of the Rongyos Gárda (Ragged Guards), a ragtag army of militias, in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia during the Second World War. The Prónay-Vannay Detachment, in charge of carrying out "special assignments," which was a euphemism for mass murder, existed at least from mid-November. The last known headquarters of the detachment was the Hubay mansion in Zugligeti Street 51, in Budapest. Members of the unit participated in the last phase of the genocide of Hungarian Jews. The detachment never reached battalion size, however; it also bore no connection, as far as personnel, social composition, and organizational structure are concerned, to the original Prónay Battalion. The members of the unit included, besides fanatical Hungarian Nazis, young volunteers who did not even know who Prónay was, deserters, and even Jews drafted into the army as laborers (*munkaszolgálatosok*). Deserters and Jewish army laborers entered the detachment seeking protection. The

identity card that came with membership in the Prónay Detachment often saved lives: it allowed its owner to stay at home when returning to the front meant death, and to choose between pretending to be a member of a killing squad and becoming its likely victim.⁸⁷ Prónay was not informed about this loophole, and clearly it was not his intention to save Jewish lives. For long, scholars believed that Prónay died on February 12, 1945, during the attempt of Nazi and Hungarian forces to break out of the Buda Castle.⁸⁸ Prónay's ideological friends, on the other hand, spread the rumor that he had been murdered by the Arrow Cross—a rumor that has found its way into recent publications as well.⁸⁹ Thanks to the opening of the Soviet archives, however, we have recently learned that Prónay was captured by Soviet troops in March 20, 1945. He was taken as a POW and was sentenced by the Soviet authorities on June 10, 1946, to twenty years forced labor on the charges of espionage and sabotage, and died in the Gulag sometime in 1947 or 1948. He was officially rehabilitated on June 27, 2001, on the basis of a law passed by the parliament of the Russian Federation in 1991.⁹⁰

Prónay's Diaries

This article, so far, has helped us reconstruct, on the basis of both old information and new evidence, the details of Pál Prónay's life. Unlike the Fascist Mussolini, the conservative authoritarian Franco, or the Nazi Göring, Prónay never obtained power or occupied an important position in the state hierarchy. Unlike the Russian White generals, Kolchak and Denikin, Prónay actually won the civil war, or at least ended up on the winning side, only to quickly lose power to his conservative rivals. Although Prónay never became a major figure in European history, he still deserves our attention: the militia leader represents a path which was not taken, a potential and a "what if" in the history of modern Hungary.⁹¹ He is important because his failure, and the treatment he received from conservative leaders, foreshadowed the fate of fascist leaders and movements and their conflict-ridden relationship with the Horthy elite in the 1930s and 1940s. The militia leader's claim in his diary that he was the first National Socialist in Europe was an empty boast typical of Prónay (he was, indeed, too reactionary, too much a child of the pre-1918 world, to be called a fascist). Yet his political views, especially his fanatical hatred for Jews, Freemasons, socialists, and Communists, bear too close a resemblance to those of the Nazis for his claim to be dismissed completely. Unlike Prónay, Hitler and the members of his entourage (with the possible exception of Julius Streicher) could not be described



Above: a photo from Prónay's wedding, courtesy of Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történelmi Levéltára (ABTL)/Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security. Below: Prónay's identification card, courtesy of Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum (MNM)/Hungarian National Museum





Above: The White Terror: execution of a political opponent. Below: Left, Prónay with women; right, Prónay's men executing Communists. All photos courtesy of Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum (MNM)/Hungarian National Museum



as sadistic anti-Semites. However, there were plenty of sadists in the lower echelons of the Nazi bureaucracy, especially in the camps, where the military leader would have felt at home. Prónay and his troops killed, tortured, mistreated, expelled, and imprisoned more Jews in East-Central and Central Europe than anyone before the Nazi takeover of power in 1933.⁹² Finally, Prónay deserves our attention as a writer: his three-volume diary (one was unfortunately lost), written between 1919 and 1922 but revised in the late 1930s and early 1940s, provides a window into the mental and cultural universe of a sadistic officer who once had been the head of Horthy's Praetorian Guard. The diary also gives a detailed image of the rich and almost completely forgotten culture of the minor aristocracy and the officers' corps—all viewed, of course, through the prism of a deeply disturbed and paranoid man. In many ways, reading Prónay's diary is like watching the contemporary expressionist film, the *Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*: the viewer/reader never knows whether the events depicted are real or the hallucinations of a mental patient. Yet the diary, like the film or the drawing and paintings of Otto Dix and Georg Grosz, speaks volumes about contemporary culture and its potential for violence.⁹³

The latter remark suggests the limited utility of the diary as a primary document. The selectively edited version of the diary (the original, which has been deposited in the National Security Historical Archive in Budapest, has been read by only a handful of scholars) represents one of the most misused sources in Hungarian history; after 1947, its passages were employed to further discredit the leading politicians of the defunct Horthy regime.⁹⁴ Scholars are thus well advised to check and countercheck information related to major events in the diary; they are also warned not to take the militia leader's often amusing and always passionate description of historical figures at face value. The diary is, in the end, mainly about the author; it can be used, especially for lack of other types of evidence, to reconstruct the details of his life. It does not, however, speak directly to Prónay's motives, the events that shaped his psyche, or the inner stirrings of his soul that found that found an outlet in violence.

The rough paramilitary leader did not write his diary to self-diagnose (he, most likely, thought that psychotherapy was a Jewish science unworthy of serious consideration). He did not labor on his diary to help future historians find their way through the labyrinth of Hungarian political history. He wrote with a limited and self-serving goal in mind. He wanted to achieve political rehabilitation and humiliate his one-time friends and allies. The elderly Prónay was infuriated by the state-sponsored Gömbös cult; he also envied the fame and fortune of his old comrades and subordinates, such as László Magasházy, the Héjjas brothers, and Árpád Taby. He wanted to set the historical record straight by destroying or at least tarnishing

the reputations of his rivals. The timing was not accidental either: Prónay's stories, especially those dealing with the torture and murder of Jews, have to be understood in the context of the first stage of the Second World War, when Nazi Germany had still been winning, or at least not yet losing, the military conflict. They made sense only in the context of the moral decline inaugurated by the military conflict, increased discrimination against Jews, and the onset of the Holocaust.

My purpose here is to examine the techniques that Prónay used to create respect among his contemporaries: his "impression management" skills, the quality of his performance on the social and political stage and, finally, the mistakes he made in various roles. The methods I use to analyze the diary have been borrowed from the sociological school of "symbolic interactionism."⁹⁵ By making constant reference to public opinion, as reflected in contemporary literature, I seek to highlight both the congruities and the conflicts between elite and middle-class norms and role expectations, on the one hand, and the ideology and behavior of the paramilitary leader, on the other. The purpose of this exercise is to both understand Prónay as a product of his environment and separate him from the more respectable members of the middle and upper classes; to show Prónay as an independent, and in some respects, isolated actor, and explain that the White Terror would not have been possible without the existence of a large reservoir of violence in the culture of the same groups. Prónay's anecdotes and jokes, including the anti-Semitic ones, had been told and retold countless times. To what extent they met the approval of his audience, at which point his crude and often violent stories became counterproductive, and the consequences of his misconstrued storytelling are the subjects of the remaining part of this essay.

The Gentleman

Prónay believed that the way to achieve political rehabilitation was to project the image of a perfect gentleman. The word gentleman (*úr*) had a slightly different connotation in Hungarian than in English in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the English word referred to internalized values, deeplyfelt convictions, and personal qualities (self-control, for example, and wealth), *úr* emphasized behavior, role expectation, and inherited social status (rather than acquired or inherited wealth).⁹⁶ Admittedly, "gentleman" was a fluent and evolving concept which allowed for great variation, even in Hungary. The aristocracy (the old aristocracy of blood) had always emphasized conspicuous consumption whereas the officer corps continued to pride itself on its knowledge of etiquette. As *arbiter*

elegantiae, officers considered style, honor, and professional achievements more important than wealth and inherited social status.⁹⁷ The gentry, or at least its more atavistic members, on the other hand, equated wastefulness and debauchery with gentlemanly values, while the civil service class believed that professionalism, high culture and bourgeois values, such as modesty and self-control were integral parts of gentlemanly behavior and identity.⁹⁸

Prónay's eagerness to display his noble and aristocratic credentials and define himself in terms of the images and social expectations associated with the aristocracy separated him from other high-ranking officers. Even though he was also a baron, Col. Anton Lehár, brother of the famous composer Franz Lehár and Prónay's rival, stressed in his memoirs professional qualifications, war service, organizational skills, and unwavering loyalty to the king and the legitimist cause during the counterrevolution. Both Prónay's and Lehár's troops organized pogroms (admittedly, Lehár's units committed fewer atrocities). However, one cannot find an openly anti-Semitic remark in Lehár's memoir. The colonel, unlike Prónay, also steered clear of innuendoes, juicy rumors, sexual jokes, and personal attacks, which might have offended or alienated his readers.⁹⁹

Born a baron, Prónay sought to project an aristocratic rather than a middle-class image of a gentleman. He never missed any opportunity to draw attention to his ancient lineage (usually by disparaging his rivals' claim to a noble pedigree). A real gentleman, he suggested in his diary, was also recognizable by his spending habits and exquisite taste. Thus we learn that he wore the finest of civilian clothes; he smoked only cigars and fine Virginia cigarettes; he was a gourmet who knew the best restaurants in Sopron, Szombathely, Szeged, Budapest, and Vienna, and was an expert on wine and whisky. He only stayed in the most expensive hotels, such as the Gellért, Royal, and Pannónia in Budapest, the Kass Hotel in Szeged, and the Sacher in Vienna. He possessed firearms of the finest quality and horses of the highest pedigree. He owned many cars, including a Fiat, a Mercedes and a small Puch car; although he had learned how to drive, he still employed a chauffeur and, even in the direst of circumstances, at least one servant. Prónay was, or claimed to be, a distinguished sportsman; the sports that he pursued were, of course, accessible only to the wealthy and the cream of the officer corps. Thus we learn from his diary that he regularly visited aristocratic estates to hunt wild boar, deer, fox, and small game; that he was an excellent equestrian and, as a young man, had won prizes as a jockey; that he played tennis, was a good swimmer and knew how to sail; that, in the early 1900s, in fact, he sailed to North Africa. He was, allegedly, also good at winter sports, such as sleighing, skating, and skiing. Prónay considered himself a

smart gambler, equally at ease in the smoky hotel rooms in Budapest and the most expensive casinos of Monte Carlo, and a highly respectable socialite, a welcome guest at exclusive tea parties, soirées, and balls.

Prónay sought to appeal both to officers and members of the social elite; however, his definition of a gentleman, and the image that he tried to project of himself, stood closer to the aristocratic variety. While the two definitions were not entirely incompatible, they diverged in regards to consumption patterns and taste: few professional soldiers of Prónay's rank could afford to buy a Mercedes in the early 1920s, for example. While his fellow officers spoke only Hungarian and German and a smattering of "army Slavic" or Romanian, he, a man of the world, Prónay suggested, was also able to speak French. Prónay went to great lengths to show that he was not a racist or a religious bigot, and that he did not choose his associates, friends, and lovers on the basis of ethnicity or religion. He had only contempt for Hungarian nationalists, especially *Honvéd* officers, who, he was convinced, wanted independence from Austria only because they lacked the talent to succeed in the German-speaking federal bureaucracy and common army. While the majority of officers travelled only on business assignments, he, the scion of scientists, explorers, and hunters of exotic animals, went on tours. Whereas regular officers barely knew the monarchy, he frequently visited Western Europe and, at least once, North Africa. Even his dream of emigrating and becoming a rancher in Latin America must have sounded quite aristocratic to his contemporaries. The image of a gentleman farmer in the New World could be easily reconciled with the agrarian tradition of the landed nobility; it comes as no surprise that the figure of an aristocratic entrepreneur in the Americas appeared frequently in contemporary Central European, mainly German, novels.¹⁰⁰

The image that Prónay painted of himself in his diary, and which he had projected in the casinos, restaurants, cafés, and race tracks, must have looked credible to the more gullible among his friends and acquaintances. Because of his social origins, spending habits, expensive taste and knowledge of etiquette, they must have considered Prónay a gentleman of the oldest and most respectable mold. Yet there was something forced in the way in which he tried to prove his aristocratic credentials. The militia leader, indeed, drove expensive cars, rode the best of horses, and stayed in expensive hotels. However, as he was foolish or arrogant enough to admit in his diary, these objects and animals were not his: they were stolen or, as he euphemistically called it in his diary, "procured" by his men from wealthy Jews and foreigners.¹⁰¹ The money that he so generously spent in high-class hotels and restaurants was also extorted from the same people.¹⁰² In the interwar period, he

owned a house at 38 Szentkirályi Street in the heavily Jewish Eighth District in Budapest. (Although the sources do not indicate how he acquired the house, given his history and the fact that he had lost his savings and that his salary was low, it would not be surprising if he had stolen the mansion from a Jewish family.) This was certainly not the way aristocrats or even regular officers behaved; stealing money from Jews and admitting it undermined, without the author recognizing it, the very purpose of his diary.

Eager to project the image of a perfect gentleman, Prónay grasped every opportunity to demonstrate his cultural accomplishments. He mentioned, however, only about half a dozen books (mainly military memoirs and biographies of “great men,” such as Napoleon) as his sources of information about the world. He made no reference to Hungarian literature, sociology or philosophy. Artists and art objects failed to make their way into the diary of the man whose predecessors had been noted art collectors. As a telling sign of his provincialism, the militia leader did not mention any of the galleries that he could have visited during his tours in Western Europe. Theaters, the nineteenth-century and bourgeois equivalent of medieval cathedrals, were brought up in the diary only in connection with meeting friends and acquaintances. Prónay failed to mention any play that had changed him or at least captured his imagination, and he was proud of the fact that he did not play any instrument and understood very little about classical music. The only music he, the son of an amateur composer, seems to have regularly listened to, and sung, was “Gypsy music,” the urban equivalent of Hungarian country music.¹⁰³

In the end, despite his pretensions, the image that Prónay projected in his diary was that of a *déclassé*. His regular income was relatively low, and his way of life and cultural profile increasingly resembled those of his fellow officers, who, by the early twentieth century, had come predominantly from the middle and lower-middle classes. In his recent book on the Austro-Hungarian officers’ corps, István Deák painted a rather sober picture of the cultural habits of professional soldiers.¹⁰⁴ The memoirs of Gyula Kádár, a high-ranking military officer of the Horthy regime, suggest that the situation did not improve significantly in the interwar period.¹⁰⁵ The obvious gaps in the officers’ education and culture provided people, who for political reasons were hostile to the military caste, with an inexhaustible source of jokes and merriment. The Austro-Hungarian officers in Jaroslav Hašek’s classic novel *Good Soldier Švejk* (1923) were heavy drinkers (“the more we drank the soberer we became,” as one of them put it). They visited brothels (hiring preferably more than one prostitute at a time) and vaudeville shows (where female dancers wore no underwear), and gambled small fortunes away at the casino tables. Hungarian hussar

officers in Joseph Roth's novel *The Radetzky March* (1932), which deals with the period before the war, were little better than brutes. Even the deposed Communist dictator of Hungary, Mátyás Rákosi, who served in the First World War, could not miss the opportunity to make fun of professional soldiers. A high-ranking officer on the examination board, according to Rákosi, received a request from his superiors to let a candidate pass his reserve officer's examination because he was the brother of a famous actress and opera singer, and the entire military and political elite, including Archduke Joseph, "had seen her as [in the role of] Carmen." The candidate was duly approved, and during the banquet that followed the examinations, the examining officer, who had understood only part of what was asked of him, turned to the colleague who had made the request and asked: "Look, Bizsó, I have passed your Jew. But now tell me at last what Carmen is: is it a greyhound or a race horse?"¹⁰⁶

Prónay considered the ability, dependent as it was on social status, to give "satisfaction" in a duel as the most important attribute of a gentleman. Dueling had its roots in medieval times; that this atavistic custom not only survived but remained legal in interwar Hungary speaks volumes about the country's relative backwardness and the conservative nature of the Horthy regime.¹⁰⁷ Admittedly, as many historians have pointed out, dueling could have many modern functions as well, for example, as a conduit of social mobility in a society plagued with ethnic, religious and social prejudices.¹⁰⁸ Thus many middle-class Jews, like the doctor in Roth's *The Radetzky March*, chose dueling to defend their newly obtained rights and privileges, ward off anti-Semitic attacks, and assert their human dignity.¹⁰⁹ Many officers believed that dueling helped to instill professional values, such as the notion of self-sacrifice and unwavering courage, into future officers.¹¹⁰ The custom may have boosted morale, reinforced the *corps d'esprit* among professional soldiers, helped officers to assert their alleged moral superiority vis-à-vis civilians, and reinforced their claim for membership in the elite (a function that was particularly important to professionals who had come from the lower middle class). Finally, the elite had practiced dueling to emphasize ethnic identity in a multicultural Austro-Hungarian Empire before 1918 and assert the superiority of Hungarian culture over the culture of neighboring states and ethnic groups in the interwar period.

While he doubted that civilians could have honor at all, Prónay perceived and was prepared to punish the slightest violation of his honor as a gentleman. In this and many other respects, he was the product of a bygone age. Bourgeois honor, as Arthur Schopenhauer remarked in the nineteenth century, depended on one's actions and words. The honor of a gentleman, on the other hand, hinged on the opinion of others, or more precisely, on the absence of openly stated negative opinions, which

had little to do with the words, actions, and character of the individual involved. Bourgeois honor was impervious to slight, innuendoes, and rumors and could be defended in the court of law and in the court of public opinion by using rational arguments. Gentlemanly honor, on the other hand, was a perishable commodity, which had to be defended, with arm in hand, against every rumor, trivial slight, and baseless gossip. Bourgeois honor was based on righteous action and truth, Schopenhauer continued; gentlemanly honor, on the other hand, was based on intimidation and the use of raw force: it provided the lowliest characters with the opportunity not only to insult but also to kill innocent and worthy people with impunity.¹¹¹

Prónay was exactly the kind of man Schopenhauer feared would abuse the concept of gentlemanly honor for his own purposes, plying violence for personal gain. He resembled the caricature of Hungarian officers who used wooden swords to settle their disputes in the disarmed POW camps in Russia during the First World War.¹¹² He brought to life the main character in Arthur Schnitzler's short story, *Lieutenant Gustl* (1900). Relieved that he did not have to commit suicide because he had not punished a lower-class civilian who failed to pay him respect, the young lieutenant looked forward to his next duel with a middle-class civilian, whose harmless remark he had either deliberately misconstrued or had been too ignorant to understand. Like Lieutenant Gustl, Prónay was a fearless and ferocious dueler but, as always, he overplayed his hand. In 1923, Prime Minister Bethlen was forced to challenge Prónay to a duel because the militia leader had called him a liar. The "Transylvanian fox" was not the man, however, who would let himself be killed over a senseless remark uttered by a man of Prónay's character and reputation. Rather than seeking redress in a regular court (thus *de facto* recognizing bourgeois honor as equal to gentlemanly honor), the prime minister turned to an honor court to settle the dispute. The honor court, manned by Bethlen's trusted allies, including Prónay's distant cousin, Baron György Prónay, in turn, declared Prónay's charge baseless and his behavior reprehensible. The militia leader expected the honor court would give him a green light to kill the prime minister of Hungary with impunity; instead, he was forced to publicly apologize to his nemesis. The case created a precedent: after 1923, members of the elite were no longer obliged to respond to Prónay's provocations. In other words, after 1923, the elite did not take Prónay seriously as a gentleman.

The Moral Crusader

In his diary, Prónay spent an extraordinary amount of time describing the sexual behavior of his contemporaries. Although anecdotes about the glamorous life of aristocrats and wealthy commoners seem misplaced in a military diary, they did fulfill an important function: they were meant to impress readers and prove that the militia leader, despite his tribulations, had remained an insider. These stories, with a few exceptions, dealt with the transgression of sexual boundaries and the threats posed to respectable society by social and ethnic outsiders. The tale of sixty-year-old Baron István Ebergényi, who fell in love with and later married his niece, forty years his junior, served a didactic purpose, for example. Since Prónay was about the same age in 1941, when he was editing his diary for publication, as Baron István Ebergényi was in 1919, and because his wayward wife was also much younger than he was, the story may have reflected his own paranoia. According to Prónay, the old baron fell sick one day; suspicious that this young wife and his sister might have poisoned him, the elderly baron forced the two women at gunpoint to drink the tea they had served him. His suspicion then was unfounded, but he did die a year later under mysterious circumstances. Given the family's sordid history, it would not be surprising if they had poisoned him, Prónay told his readers. Baron István Ebergényi's sister, Ilona Ebergényi, and her lover, Count Chorinszky, had poisoned Chorinszky's wife, a famous actress in Munich, Prónay whispered to his reader. The count was able to escape justice by taking his life with the revolver that his father had smuggled into his cell; Mrs. Ebergényi, however, died as a convicted criminal in prison in the 1850s. Baron Ebergényi's second sister became an alcoholic and married a pig herder. Ilona Ebergényi had a daughter Margit who, even though she had received the best education (she attended the famous Sercé Ceurb in Pressbaum near Vienna), eloped, soon after graduation, with a servant. Until her death, he, Prónay, had regularly visited Mrs. István Ebergényi, whose taste, class, and knowledge of the world he deeply admired. She was, indeed, a beautiful and good person; rumor had it, Prónay told his readers, that she was an illegitimate child of the king of Denmark. This famous woman loved and trusted Prónay so much that she had appointed him the executor of her will. She died in 1911 under suspicious circumstances, and he could not carry out her will because it had somehow disappeared.¹¹³

Prónay was an inveterate rumormonger, who drew enormous pleasure from the tragedy of others. He loved to pose as the moral judge in his censorship of aristocrats, like one of the Erdődy brothers, who had married a "peasant" woman. But he was even more disturbed by the pretensions of middle-class commoners who dared to date and marry the daughters of old aristocratic families. Such upstarts, in his stories, could never achieve their goals. Capt. Victor Ranzenberger, Prónay's one-

time deputy, fancied Count György Erdődy's beautiful, young and well-educated daughter, Countess Fanny ("Baby") Erdődy. Rantzenberger, who had passed forty, looked and behaved, Prónay informed his readers, like "a circus acrobat." Lacking social grace, the commoner Rantzenberger failed to notice that he had become, while playing the role of a troubadour, a laughing stock both in the Erdődy household and in the good society of the county. With tongue in cheek, the elderly Count György Erdődy even declared that he would not stand in the way of his daughter's happiness, knowing perfectly well that the young countess would never marry a man of Rantzenberger's social background and character.¹¹⁴

The head of the most murderous paramilitary unit in Hungary was a cultured conservative; yet the way he related to and talked about women was very different from the attitude and behavior pattern of German Freikorps leaders. Klaus Theweleit, who analyzed the memoirs of seven militia leaders, noted that German officers rarely dwelt on women in their writings. Women in their works were "nameless, dateless and outside history. They are representatives, child bearers, silent supporters of their husbands and observers." They lacked individual features, had no public personae, and made no impact on political events. In these memoirs and novels, the separation of genders was almost complete: "naturally shy" women stayed at home or worked as nurses in military hospitals and waited patiently for the right men (usually the best friends of their brothers) to come along. Young men of middle-class background, however, shunned sexual relations in order to fulfill their destiny as heroes and saviors of the nation. The self-esteem and happiness of Freikorps leaders and their men, Theweleit continues, depended entirely on Germany's standing in the world rather than on private ends, including their success with women. Sexually rigid militia men were, in fact, afraid of the opposite sex, which represented "flood" and "contamination" and posed the threat of dissolution. In their memoirs, the militia leaders distinguished between two kinds of women: the respectable "white" (middle-class, elite, often virgin and shy, and civilized) kind and the disreputable "red" (uncouth and assertive) daughters and wives of working-class men. This distinction served to convince the readers of their enemies' bestiality, thus providing the rationale for violence, which also functioned as a substitute for sexual relations. Freikorps soldiers "look for ecstasy not in embraces but in explosions, in the rumbling of bomber squadrons and brains being shot to flames. In all these texts, the fear of dissolution though union with a woman actually causes desire to flee from its objects, and then transform itself into a representation of violence."¹¹⁵

While he was at least as anti-Semitic as any of the Freikorps leaders and more sadistic than any of them, the hussar captain Prónay, who remained politically, so-

cially and culturally a conservative, had a more relaxed attitude toward women and sexuality (thus casting doubt on Theweleit's thesis that militia violence was rooted in sexual frustration).¹¹⁶ Upper-class women in his diary were not objects owned by their male family members and confined to their households; on the contrary, they were flesh-and-blood human beings, strong individuals, and important social and political actors, who made or unmade men's careers. The more courageous among them, such as Ostenburg's fiancée, Countess Lulu Esterházy, became heroes. As Prónay described them, some were desirable, proud, flirtatious, and assertive young women eager to learn more about, and participate in, the business of the world; others were socially elitist and politically reactionary middle-aged socialites and elderly matrons, perhaps culturally narrow but also full of earthy wisdom and social grace. German officers may have been running from women to find their calling and destiny on the battlefield; Prónay enjoyed, both as sexual partners and friends, the company of upper-class women and clearly had no desire to die in the war. Unlike the young Freikorps soldiers, he preferred married women to virgins. Ethnically, his lovers and friends represented a diverse company: Hungarians, Germans, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and South Slavs, a Dane, and at least one American woman were mentioned by name in the diary. He met them alone or in the company of other women in hotel rooms or at their homes during their husbands' absences. He was particularly close to Baroness Éva Rohonczy; in the spring of 1920, Prónay brought an expensive wreath to her mother's funeral, and she, in return, stayed, during her frequent visits to Budapest, in the same hotel as Prónay for weeks.¹¹⁷

Clearly, the middle-aged Prónay was not a sexually frustrated man; whatever the source of his violence was, it had precious little to do with his attitude to women. The militia leader frequently visited elderly women, mainly family matrons, whose company he clearly enjoyed and whose advice he appreciated. The future intelligence officer thrived on rumors, gossip, and innuendo; there can be no doubt that many of the anecdotes that he incorporated in his diary had originated in part in the salons and boudoirs of his female friends. He had much in common with these women: as a recently published memoir suggests, the wives and daughters of the lower aristocracy and gentry shared Prónay's ethnic prejudices, especially toward Rumanians, his dislike of Jews (even though they were not violent anti-Semites), class arrogance, fear of radical workers and peasants, love for country life, and hatred of the city as well as all that it represented, including modern art and literature.¹¹⁸ Prónay saw himself as an insider, a connoisseur of wine and women, and a true "ladies' man," who could pick and choose among the flowers of good society.¹¹⁹ His enemies, the legitimists, he told his readers, sent beautiful young aristocratic women to bribe and seduce

him during the counterrevolution; he, the patriot, however, never compromised the interests of the country and rejected their advances.¹²⁰ Women always preferred him to any other men, he continued, even if his competitors were wealthier and more powerful than he was. In the fall of 1919 in Szeged, it was rumored that Mrs. Sóváry had an affair with the minister of defense and head of the evolving National Army, Admiral Miklós Horthy; Prónay noted with satisfaction in his memoirs that he was Mrs. Sóváry's first choice, but as a true measure of his character and a sign of his professionalism, he, unlike Horthy, did not waste his time on frivolous affairs when the nation was in mortal danger.¹²¹ The last commander of the Austro-Hungarian navy also tried to seduce Countess Almeé Pálffy-Daun, but "the beautiful countess," as Prónay bragged in his memoirs, chose him over the regent of Hungary.

Twenty years after their wedding, at a time when she was rumored to be having an affair with the Italian ambassador, Prónay still had only good things to say about his wayward wife. From his diary, we learn that the two first met in the Castle District in Budapest in the spring of 1920. They quickly became "friends" but did not see each other again until October. Then during her next visit in Budapest, they picnicked, attended a few social functions, mainly dinners, together and, as Prónay admitted in his memoirs, discussed politics. Ms. Pálffy-Daun, who had been the lady-in-waiting to Queen Zita, allegedly wanted to convert him to the legitimist cause. At the end of her short visit, Prónay proposed, and the couple agreed that they would have their wedding next spring; until then they would keep the news secret. The uncharacteristically small wedding (a sign of his *déclassé* status) took place in Budapest in April 1921. It was attended, besides close relatives and a few civilian friends, only by the officers of the Prónay Battalion. Prónay, who as a single man had traveled throughout Europe and North Africa, did not take his wife on a honeymoon, moreover. He claimed that he was too busy and the political situation too volatile to leave town. Still, the reader cannot escape the conclusion that there was perhaps more behind the couple's decision to remain in Budapest than the pressing demands of Prónay's work.¹²²

Whatever "the backstage secrets" of his marriage were, Prónay was able, in a rare gesture, to keep them hidden from his readers. In his diary, he never fell out of the role of a respectful and devoted husband, and described his wife as "smart," "good-hearted," and "beautiful." Yet there was more to Prónay than his undeniable love and devotion to his wife. He was foolish enough to admit in his diary that he had gained the reputation of a heavy drinker and gambler and a man who preferred the company of "cheap and easy" (*ledér*) women.¹²³ He tried to dismiss these accusations as baseless; however, as if he were talking to a different audience, in other parts

of his memoirs, he bragged about his drinking and gambling habits and his sexual adventures. He told the story, for example, of his trip to Monte Carlo in 1907, when he lost all his money and was able to make his way back home only because he had bought a round-trip ticket. In Trieste he obtained from his old friend Count Orsich Levine (whose name suggests Jewish origins) a loan large enough to finance his sexual escapades with the blonde and bored wife of a French manufacturer.¹²⁴ Even more damaging to his image as a gentleman who could control his drives was the revelation that he was not completely immune to the charms of lower-class women. He was certainly very close to Lujza, his Slovak chambermaid (officers usually had male servants) in the Hotel Gellért in Budapest; she was his confidante and spy and perhaps more, as the description of their sentimental partings and reunions and the larger-than-usual tips and the expensive pieces of jewelry that Prónay gave her seem to suggest. Prónay was also the friend of Bella, a dancer, folksinger, and the proud owner of the Hotel Goldene Spinne in Vienna, which she allegedly had bought on the money she received from Hungarian officers and legitimist politicians.¹²⁵

The diary also includes anecdotes and crude jokes that might have gained applause in the officers' casinos but, if told, most likely alienated upper-middle-class and aristocratic readers. In 1913, Prónay had a falling-out with one of his younger colleagues and a distant relative, Capt. György Görgey. The captain, the scion of an old and equally distinguished gentry family, accused Prónay of trying to seduce his sixteen-year-old wife (Prónay was thirty-nine). The jealous Görgey forbade Prónay to talk to his wife, and the affair would have ended in a duel had Prónay not transferred to Vienna for further training. With satisfaction, Prónay remarked in his memoirs that soon after his departure the young woman ran off with a Polish officer.¹²⁶ The two men's careers ran on parallel tracks, however, and they met again, first in Vienna and then in Szeged in 1919. In Szeged, Prónay continues, he and his officers were invited to the French garrison to watch a horse show. After the performance, Prónay, two of his closest subordinates, and a young woman boarded the same coach, he and the young woman facing Görgey and another officer. Prónay explained that "during the whole trip I discreetly tickled the lower parts of Görgey's body with the tip of my shoes, and watched the happy grin on his face as he thought that the pretty woman sitting beside me was giving him signals. He became very disappointed when I later told him the truth. He then started an argument because he did not want to believe me. I told him that he should ask my fellow passengers in person. Because of this joke he held a grudge against me for a long time."¹²⁷

Stories like this may have made Prónay popular among young men in the officers' cantina; however, they did not make him more respectable or help him to

achieve political rehabilitation. They cast him in a bad light and showed him as he was: a crude man unable to practice self-control. Racy stories and crude jokes revealed the less public character of his primary group, the Austro-Hungarian officers' corps. Indeed, among officers, seducing the wife of one's colleague or subordinate was not out of the ordinary and rarely carried the threat of official sanctions or social ostracism. Whereas in Germany the seducers were usually forced into retirement, in Austria-Hungary they became heroes; it was the husbands rather than they whose reputation and career suffered as a result of the affairs.¹²⁸ The army leadership tolerated this practice because it did not want to change the rules regulating the marriage of officers. For a number of reasons, among which morale was the most important, it was difficult for officers under the age of forty to marry unless they came from wealthy families or their brides were rich. Officers could not hire female servants, keep female housekeepers, or live in a common-law relationship. These were impossible demands, which the army leadership had neither the means nor the desire to enforce, however. Thus when it came to the sexual indiscretions of their subordinates, military superiors usually looked the other way—at least until the often outrageous behavior of young officers threatened the reputation of their units and their own careers. In the end, the young, bored, but virile officers often chose to visit brothels, acquired concubines among the lower classes, seduced the wives of their elder colleagues, or provided companionship for widows in their garrison towns. As both predators and victims, military officers participated in the exciting game of seduction and intrigue that provided an inexhaustible source of information and inspiration for contemporary writers and musicians and helped to define what courtship was in the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War.¹²⁹

That Prónay, a tall and handsome hussar officer, was also a noted womanizer should, therefore, come as no surprise. Given the nature of his profession and the tradition of his unit (hussars were still seen as symbols of virility), the opposite would have been more unusual. Still, the way in which he discussed his affairs was odd—at least from a man who sought respectability and political rehabilitation. Other politicians also seduced or at least tried to seduce their colleagues' wives and daughters; however, they kept quiet about their successes, or failures, in their memoirs. Prime Minister Count István Bethlen, for example, had many affairs. Yet he did not brag about his conquests in public; neither did he dwell on other people's private lives for long in his letters. Even Regent Miklós Horthy, a rough naval officer, was smart enough not to include crude jokes in his memoirs. Modesty and moderation, however, were not among Prónay's virtues. As a storyteller, he followed in the footsteps of

Háry János, a folk hero and the character in Zoltán Kodály's famous opera of the same title, who entertained peasants in his village tavern with his wartime stories in the early nineteenth century. In one of his stories he, the common hussar, captures Napoleon in the heat of the battle and subsequently marries the emperor's daughter as a reward. Compared to Háry János, Prónay was a modest man: he only wanted to be recognized as a gentleman, a national hero, and the first European fascist.

The Statesman

In his diary, Prónay sought to project the image of a wise and selfless patriot who had foreseen everything and had always put the nation above his personal interests. He judged politicians and their actions on the basis of three factors: their sexual behavior; ethnic and religious backgrounds; and membership in political and social associations, including Freemason lodges. In Prónay's opinion, the October Revolution, the origins of which are still subject to intense debate among historians, was the work of "a few red-haired Jewish dudes [zsidójampeczek], who ran up and down Rákóczi Street loudly proclaiming: 'We are in a revolution!' And the typical Budapest citizen believed [them] and accepted it [the revolution] as reality." The revolution succeeded, in Prónay's interpretation, only because Lt. Gen. Géza Lukachich, whose wife was of Jewish descent, failed to stand up to the mob.¹³⁰ On October 31, 1918, at the request of Count Mihály Károlyi, Jews and Freemasons, such as Pál Kéri, László Fényes, and Hugó Daehne, killed István Tisza, Hungary's wartime prime minister, the last man who could have saved the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prónay told his readers.¹³¹ The case was tried in court in 1921. Prónay, who had been closely following the proceedings, was so infuriated by the behavior of the accused "who were just laughing it up and looking around insolently, challenging us [spectators]," that he "almost decided to end this shameful scandal, leave and fetch my battalion, surround the Justice building and take these scumbags, who were just laughing it up on the defendants' stands, out of the hands of the weak and easily persuadable court and execute them."¹³²

The October Revolution and the Communist dictatorship were allegedly the work of Jews and Freemasons; the same people, Prónay was convinced, were responsible for the failure of the counterrevolution. The first counterrevolutionary government did not have any Jewish minister, he told his readers; however, it already "included Varjassy, who, as everyone knew, was a *bona fide* [prononszirt] Freemason." The second counterrevolutionary government, however, already had two

Jewish members, Lajos Pálmai and Dr. Antal Éber, and at least three more leading politicians, Sándor Belitska, Mihály Dömötör, Aladár Balla, were “all Freemason brothers” (*a vakkoló kollégák közzé tartoztak*). Horthy’s closest advisors, Count Pál Teleki, the future prime minister of Hungary, as well as István Bethlen, both active in Szeged, had been card-carrying members of a Freemason lodge in Transylvania for decades.¹³³

Prónay’s description of the leading personalities reflected the political climate of his time. As the following passage suggests, the militia leader was as unable to distinguish real information from malicious rumor as he was to separate the political individual from the politician. He viewed his political enemies, such as Count Mihály Károlyi, the head of Hungary’s first democratic government, through the prism of salon gossip. He hated him as the leader of the democratic revolution; however, he also envied his success with women.

That day I was standing in the elevator ready to go upstairs to visit Mrs. Elemér Szemző and Mrs. Vilmos Sebastány, who also lived in the same hotel [Ritz], when Count Mihály Károlyi and another man entered. This was the first time I [had the chance to] look at his degenerate face [*pofa*] at close range. I can’t understand the taste of the beautiful Mrs. László Károlyi, neé Fanny Apponyi, who is rumored to have fallen in love with this man. It was he [Károlyi] who [arrested General] Mackensen and handed him and his army over to the enemy when he [the General] and his troops could have destroyed Communism, root and branch, in all of Europe. Mackensen then told him: “Herr Count you have no honor at all.” Mihály Károlyi often chatted with one Captain Pomerol, an English General Staff officer, who also lived in the Ritz; I knew him, because we met at the party of Baroness Gábor Bornemissa, neé Luis Preiss, who was born in America, on Veres Pálné Street. By then, Károlyi had no power and no influence; he was kissing up to the Béla Kun crowd since he could not change the situation, which he, by his stupidity, helped to create and also because he did not feel good. Soon after he emigrated to Austria; there he met Count Lajos Salm by accident on the street, who slapped him around to the delight [*gaudium*] of the entire world.¹³⁴

Prónay related his anecdotes, based as they were on a common stock of rumor and gossip, well. The inclusion of such shared information in his diary touched on one of his most obvious and important talents both as a writer and a public figure: he recognized and sought to take advantage of the emotional weaknesses and prejudices of his audience. His stories, wild and baseless as they often were, flew directly from contemporary conservative middle-class culture. In her diary Cécile Tormay, one of the best-read conservative authors in the interwar period, for example, described the October Revolution and the role of the “Red Count,” Károlyi, and his wife in almost identical language.¹³⁵ Prónay may have been paranoid; however, he did not invent

any conspiracy theory. The new stereotypical images about Jews and Freemasons were the products of the “culture of defeat.” They reflected the political disorientation and paranoia of the conservative sections of the middle class and the elite in the loser states; at the same time, they offered the people who were responsible for the outbreak of the war an excuse to evade self-examination and blame others for the postwar chaos and misery. Prónay drew heavily on the writings of prewar anti-Semitic demagogues, such as Miklós Bartha. Considered one of the fathers of modern Hungarian anti-Semitism, Bartha tried to prove in his highly popular books that Jewish usury and the survival of large aristocratic estates (*latifundia*) stood behind the rapid impoverishment and emigration of peasants before 1914.¹³⁶ Prónay took Bartha’s ideas and further radicalized them. Prónay was convinced that impoverished farmers and agricultural laborers shared his violent anti-Semitism, and that they were ready to join his revolution against the “radical outsiders.” Thus, he claimed, “had I unleashed these people on the Jews in 1920, I am sure none would have survived to tell his story.”¹³⁷

Prónay knew precious little about peasants—the root causes of their misery and their complex relations with Jews; he raised the issue of land fragmentation and rural poverty only to focus his readers’ anger on Jews. Similarly, rumors about the Jewish ancestry of foreign statesmen functioned as a shortcut to truth, or what they believed was the truth, and a substitute for real knowledge about foreign countries and different cultures. The semieducated Prónay thus claimed that he was one of the few people who was privy to the fact that

the highly cultured and diplomatically talented prime minister of Serbia, the famous Pasic, is of Jewish descent. This explains why he joined the cosmopolitan Freemasons, the vanguard of democracy with ties all over the world. Pasic’s father, alias Pollák, was a fruit merchant in the town of Pancsova, located in the Hungarian part [of the country]. He spent a lot on the education of his son, Miklós. He had taught at [a number of] foreign universities, but, having married an Orthodox Serbian woman, soon became entangled in Serbian politics. His Freemason connections landed him in the prime minister’s chair. He cared deeply about the fate of his coreligionists, and provided refuge and aid to Jews expelled from Spain; he settled them, as Spaniards, in different parts of Serbia.

Prónay was convinced that “we owe the harsh conditions [of the Treaty of Trianon] to the two Jewish bastards, Masaryk and Benes.”¹⁴⁰ Smart “Jews” like Pašić, Masaryk, and Benes were survivors: “Thrones, huge landed estates, the wealth of nations, traditions, and morals fall [down and break] to pieces but never does anything happen to the Jews. The proponents of Marxism and the Jewish-capitalist

Freemasons float like scum on the river of the revolution.” They were hypocrites, who used every ideology to achieve world domination, Prónay pontificated. Freemasons and Bolsheviks destroyed the political and social order and grabbed power in both Russia and Hungary “only to make Jews more powerful and ensure their victory over Christians.” The Freemason Jews hired talented but unscrupulous Christians as front men to carry out their agendas. More dangerous than their Jewish masters, these unscrupulous and greedy Gentiles deserved to be treated as traitors to their country.¹⁴¹

Prónay saw himself as an expert on Jews and believed that his ability to recognize Jews on sight, more than diplomatic or any tangible skills, qualified him as a statesman. His constant raving in his diary about Jews, and Gentiles acting as agents of Jews, was meant to connect with his readers, who, he believed, shared his prejudices. His stories about the members of this ethnic and religious minority drew heavily on a stock of stereotypical images shared mainly by the members of the officers’ corps, the gentry, and the provincial middle class. His anecdotes also revolved around rural and agrarian concerns, such as the need to protect peasants and nobles both from urban (Jewish), culture and from the allegedly insatiable greed of Jewish usurers, bankers, and commercial farmers. Among the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-Semitic demagogues, Győző Istóczy, Miklós Bartha, and Miklós Szemere seem to have exercised the greatest influence on Prónay’s thinking about Jews.¹⁴² The man whom he admired the most, however, was the politician, diplomat, conspirator, student organizer, professional gambler, and *bon vivant*, Miklós Szemere. The Oxford-educated Szemere blended agrarian anti-Semitism with quasi-religious fervor and pseudoscientific ideas about race, making it particularly attractive to young university students. Szemere was also the first politician in Hungary to combine anti-Semitism and neoconservatism with paramilitary politics. He advocated the paramilitary training of youth and the establishment of university battalions both as the first stage toward the creation of an independent Hungarian army and a useful tool to militarize society. As a radical anti-Semite, Szemere had fought tooth and nail for the reversal of Jewish emancipation for decades and was one of the earliest advocates of *numerus clausus* legislation in the national parliament. Prónay respected Szemere both as a political ally and as a gentleman; he stole his ideas and sought to imitate his behavior. However, he lacked his master’s intellect and political and social skills to make an original contribution to the history of anti-Semitism as an intellectual movement and cultural phenomenon in Hungary.¹⁴³

Prónay’s anti-Semitism was rooted in the culture of the prewar Hungarian rural middle class, the gentry, and the officer corps. However, it also reflected the

radicalization of anti-Semitism as an ideological and political movement and the emergence of more violent and “actionable” stereotypical images (Jews as Communists, traitors, etc.) during the later stage of the war and the revolutions.¹⁴⁴ For a few years, these images had gained wide currency, from England and the United States to Russia, only to be pushed into the background after the onset of consolidation around 1924. But in the immediate postwar period they were omnipresent. Thus, in 1919 and 1920, not only German fascists, such as Hitler and Rosenberg, but also many German conservatives believed that “Jewish greed and hunger for power” were behind both the Russian Revolution and the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁴⁵ Unlike German and American conservatives, Prónay not only “talked the talk”; as a well-known murderer and a sadist, he also “walked the walk.” While other counter-revolutionaries, such as Aurél and Iván Héjjas, tried to focus their readers’ attention on their exploits and generally kept quiet about the robberies and the murder of Jewish landowners and merchants in their books, the ex-militia leader was clearly unable to control his emotions. Instead of trying to avoid the topic altogether, he described with gusto and in minute detail the atrocities that his men, in his presence, had committed between 1919 and 1921. This may have appealed to some of his readers, who shared his sadistic type of anti-Semitism.¹⁴⁶ It was ill-suited to gain the respect of mainstream readers and achieve political rehabilitation, however. The atrocities drew attention not only to his hatred of the Jews, but also, and more importantly, to his lack of discipline both as a military officer (civil servant) and a writer. His failure to conceal his past as well as to hide from view the atrocities that he and his men had committed in the name of the Horthy regime continued to disqualify him from membership in the elite.

Prónay’s obsession with Jews in his diary and his failure to bury the more violent aspects of his anti-Semitism was his first mistake. His failure to channel his hatred toward his conservative rivals in a more respectable route was his second. The long monologues in his diary about the alleged perfidy of his conservative rivals; the passion with which he denounced them as traitors, fools, and “friends of the Jews”; and the endless repetition of the slights and injuries that he had allegedly suffered at their hands can easily tire the reader. In real life, the same tirades made Prónay look both foolish and petty. Memories of his past humiliations seem to have functioned like Nietzsche’s famous tarantula, “the spirit of vengeance,” which had first poisoned and then slowly consumed his mind. Prónay was full of resentment; he was a man who “stores up feelings of injury, weakness, inferiority, degradation, inadequacy and envy stemming from defeats or slights which he claims to have suffered unjustly at the hands of those stronger and of higher status than themselves.”

Prónay was “an injustice collector,” who drew pleasure and energy from his past sufferings in the hope that the time would come to take revenge on his enemies.¹⁴⁷

His portrayal of Admiral Miklós Horthy was complex, reflecting the contradictory feelings that he had toward his one-time friend. In his diary, Prónay both wanted to undermine the Horthy cult, which reached its climax in the early 1940s, after the return of some of the territories lost after the First World War, and profit from the close ties that he once had with the regent.¹⁴⁸ On the one hand, he was proud that, as a young man, Horthy had courted his cousin, Margit, and that he had attended the same high school as the admiral and two of his brothers. On other hand, he used his diary to give credence to the rumor, spread by the Arrow Cross in the late 1930s, that Horthy’s wife, Magda Purguly, was partly Jewish (her father or grandfather was only a *shochet*, a kosher butcher, in the town of Arad, the meddlesome paramilitary leader whispered into his contemporaries’ ears).¹⁴⁹ Prónay had a very low opinion of both “Rebecca,” as he and other radical anti-Semites and fascists called Mrs. Horthy, and her husband. The admiral, Prónay argued, was a vain and pretentious man. One night in Szeged in the summer of 1919, Prónay continued, Horthy had sat down at the piano in the Hotel Kass to sing a light aria from Puccini. Everybody was thrilled by his performance, since no one had known or could have imagined that the rough military man could play the piano. The audience implored him to play at least one more song; the admiral, however, politely declined their request. Prónay later learned that Horthy had never studied music and could not even read notes; he learned a few songs by heart only to impress women.¹⁵⁰

Prónay disliked Horthy both as a man and as a politician; however, he revered the power that the admiral had gathered since his appearance on the political stage in the summer of 1919. A man of faulty character and weak intellect, Horthy, Prónay was convinced, owed everything to him and his men. After his election as regent in early March 1920, Horthy

began to give a long speech; the content of the speech I can’t recall because it had no content and logic at all. He repeated slogans ceaselessly and incoherently. He emphasized his patriotism and whined over the fate of his beloved country; all this in a strange accent, with bad grammar and in an unctuous voice which reminded me of a priest saying farewell to a corpse. He talked very long, for almost an hour. We officers listened to him patiently, only exchanging understanding winks with one another. Since Szeged, this was the second time that Horthy truly shocked me, and I began to have serious doubts about him: will he be able to do his job? Will he be able to fulfill the roles that I assigned to him in Szeged? Well, we’ll see, I thought to myself with confidence. If surrounded by the right people, he will do his job, and will be able to separate the scum from those who want to work with him on the

behalf of Hungary and its people.¹⁵¹

Horthy, Prónay argued, did not deserve the trust that he and his men had placed in. He a strong will and was unable to resist his earthly desires. In Szeged, the he came under the influence of Mrs. Sóváry and “for weeks played the love-stricken adolescent in front of his fellow officers. Horthy’s wife discreetly left town, knowing her husband well and hoping that his passion would soon blow over. She might have even been secretly glad since it [the love affair] kept Horthy busy and left him with no time for his anti-Semitic and Christian friends.”¹⁵² A man of weak moral fiber, who could not even control his urges, Horthy was destined to fail as a politician. Despite repeated promises to Prónay, he failed to carry out a countrywide pogrom and punish those who had been responsible for the crimes of the democratic and Communist regimes. Not even Budapest was purged, Prónay complained. The actions of his men, including “the trashing of a few Jews and a few deaths, such as the wasting [*elgajdeszol*] of an old piano manufacturer by the Kovács brothers, was by no means an adequate response to the revolution and to Communism; they did not deliver justice to those who were behind [these events].”¹⁵³ No wonder that Horthy soon became a puppet in the hands of the “Transylvanian Freemasons”; like a soccer ball, he then was passed back and forth between the “playmaker” Count Pál Teleki and the “goalie” Count István Bethlen.¹⁵⁴ “I could not have even imagined then (and realized only much later) that I was helping a weak and indecisive man, who pretended to be a strong man to gain power,” Prónay told his readers.”¹⁵⁵

Prónay wrote his diary to undermine both the Horthy and the Gömbös cults. Not surprisingly, he had few nice things to say about his one-time colleague and political ally, who had brought him into politics in the summer of 1919. Gömbös’s mother (he whispered the commonplace rumor into his readers’ ears) was “a skinny German [Sváb] peasant woman” who worked as a midwife in her native village, Murgán.¹⁵⁶ Gömbös claimed that he had descended from an old Hungarian noble family indigenous in Burgenland, but the rightful descendent of the Jákfalvi Gömbös clan, the tavernkeeper in the village of Nagyszentmihály, did not recognize him as his relative. He was an imposter, Prónay argued, an ethnic German from Baranya country. His father worked as an underpaid substitute teacher in a local elementary school.¹⁵⁷ Gömbös and his first wife were upstarts; they moved into a large mansion in the wealthy Svábhegy district in Budapest and threw huge parties only to hide their lowly origins. Their attempts to ingratiate themselves with the elite, however, backfired, because they “did not know the basic rules of etiquette.” Gömbös’s wife, Prónay wrote,

embodied all the qualities of the Vienesse *Bürgerlädel*. As I have mentioned earlier, her father was an optic manufacturer, with the name of Reichert, who many thought was Jewish. Gömbös, as we all know, was the son of poor villagers; his father was a simple teacher, his mother occupied the position of the midwife in Murga, in Baranya County. He did not like to introduce anyone to his parents, who, because of the Serbian occupation, lived [for a while] with them in Svábhegy; he was clearly ashamed of them. Only later, to demonstrate his democratic credentials and further his career, did he begin to show them off.¹⁵⁸

Given his lowly origins, it came as no surprise that Gömbös lacked social grace and that he often behaved outrageously in the company of his superiors. He liked, for example, to spread out in a chair before Horthy and call the admiral “Micu” (nickname for Miklós). Prónay admonished Gömbös that even he, a baron and a distant relative (Prónay’s cousin married the cousin of Horthy’s brother-in-law) of the admiral, did not think it appropriate to call the head of the National Army by his first name.¹⁵⁹ Gömbös, the unscrupulous careerist, was also a thief and embezzler, Prónay implied; the future prime minister of Hungary stole expensive Persian carpets from the Freemason headquarters on Podmaniczky Street in Budapest after its occupation by the Prónay Detachment in April 1920 and pocketed the state subsidies earmarked for the main veterans’ organization, the MOVE.¹⁶⁰

Gömbös was, of course, not the only public figure who, in Prónay’s opinion, tried to pretend that he had come from a noble family. László Magasházy, Horthy’s aide-de-camp, hired a historian to prove his noble origins. In fact, Prónay told his readers, Magasházy’s father was a German peasant called Hochhausser and the son Hungarianized his name only to further his career.¹⁶¹ For the same reason, Maj. Jenő Ranzenberger (brother of his deputy, Victor Ranzenberger, in the early 1920s and one of the leaders of the Arrow Cross after 1935) changed his name to the noble and Hungarian-sounding Ruszkay.¹⁶² Upstarts such as “the one-time elementary teacher, and Freemason lawyer,” Sándor Simonyi-Semadam, who became the prime minister of Hungary in early 1920, lacked manly virtues: he was “neither Monsieur nor Madame.”¹⁶³ István Szabó Sokoropátkai, the minister of agriculture in 1921, “made the impression of an intelligent peasant. He loved to drink and because of his obesity he could barely fit into the ministerial velvet chair, which he, anyway, did not deserve.” Peasant politicians, without exception, ate and drank too much, Prónay told his readers. In Budapest, they kept lovers and visited brothels regularly; their wives stayed at home with their children, and peasant leaders were too ashamed to appear with them in public.¹⁶⁴

The rumors that Prónay generated and helped to spread were full of poison; they were meant to show that his rivals were upstarts, venal and dishonest men, turncoats, traitors, and Communists. As military attaché of the Károlyi government to Zagreb, Gyula Gömbös, for example, advised Lt. Gen. Gábor Tánzos in the fall and winter of 1918 to disband his units. Tánzos had six thousand men under his command, a force strong enough to destroy the democratic government and prevent the Bolshevik coup. Gömbös was a snitch: he allegedly denounced his comrade, Capt. Kálmán Rácz, to the authorities in the winter of 1918. This spineless careerist even offered his services to the Communists in March 1919, Prónay told his readers.¹⁶⁵ László Magasházy had, according to the paramilitary leader, a similar career: he first served in the Red Army as an officer but, having recognized that the regime would not last long, he soon jumped off the Communist bandwagon and joined the counterrevolution. But Gömbös and Magasházy were not the only ones to change their political colors. The list of people who had supported the democratic revolution and Communist dictatorship, only to later play an important role in the counter-revolutionary regime, was long. It included such members of the interwar social, political, and military elite as Tihamér Fabinyi, the president of the Hitelbank, and Tibor Törzs, the vice president of the lower house of parliament.¹⁶⁶ Everyone knows, Prónay continued, that Gen. Károly Soós, Horthy's most trusted military man, and Henrik Werth, the future chief of the General Staff, had a Red past. In 1919, Werth, as a Red Army officer, helped put down the counterrevolution in the town of Szolnok. After the collapse, the Romanian military wanted to execute him as a Communist; thanks to the intervention of his friends, including the town's mayor, however, he was able to escape certain death.¹⁶⁷

Prónay diligently collected, and eagerly passed on, every type of potentially damaging information. As a radical anti-Semite, however, he was particularly interested in rumors about the Jewish origins of his rivals and their alleged membership in Freemason lodges. As a general rule, the more he resented and hated someone, the more information about his or her alleged Jewish origins and Freemason ties he was able to collect. He was proud to know, for example, that Prime Minister István Friedrich (the man who legalized terror in August 1919) had been the grand master of Freemason lodges in southern Hungary; it came as no surprise, Prónay argued, that he filled his cabinet with fellow Freemasons (András Csilléry, Jakab Bleyer, Lóránt Győri, etc.) and Jews (Gen. Gábor Tánzos).¹⁶⁸ The legitimist minister of the interior in early 1920, Ödön Beniczky, on the other hand, had a Jewish wife, with the name of Janka Blum. The police chief, Elemér Mattyosovszky, was rumored to be a Freemason.¹⁶⁹ General Sándor Belitska, minister of defense during the early

stages of the counterrevolution, was both part Jewish and a Freemason, Prónay was convinced.¹⁷⁰ Lt. Gen. Pál Nagy was a “tyrant, whom nobody likes; he also protects Jews. Before he entered the military, he worked as an apprentice in a pastry shop in Miskolc. One of his brothers, Miklós Nagy, a grocer in Miskolc, was arrested during the war because he delivered the army spoiled food.” Nagy allegedly called Horthy behind his back “a stupid sailor,” but still joined his camp to further his career.¹⁷¹

The diaries show Prónay in the role of the spider standing at the center of rumor nets, diligently spun from his own slime to capture and consume his rivals. The diaries also served to show that he was and, despite his tribulations, had remained an insider, a know-it-all, with access to the darkest secrets of his opponents. Part-Jews, Prónay contended, could be best recognized by their instinctive attraction to liberalism, membership in Freemason lodges, and last, but not least, by their unfailing talent for business (and dishonest business practices). Miklós Kozma, Prónay’s intelligence chief in the early 1920s and later head of the Hungarian Information Agency (MTI), best embodied, for him, the upwardly mobile Jew. Kozma’s mother had a Jewish name (Nyíri-Neumann) and was first married to a Jewish veterinarian. While married, she also had a lengthy love affair with a Hungarian hussar officer, Miklós Kozma. She later married Kozma, who adopted all her children, including Miklós, as his own. Philo-Semitism, Prónay explained, ran deep in the Kozma family: Miklós Kozma’s grandfather, Sándor Kozma, acted as the crown attorney during the infamous Tiszaeszlár blood libel trial in the early 1880s. Miklós Kozma became a member of the EKSz by violating its constitution, which explicitly barred Jews from entering the organization. As undeniable proof of his ethnic origins, which automatically implied Jewish support, Kozma succeeded in every venture that he had undertaken in the interwar period. His business partners included, among others, Tibor Eckhardt, a fellow right radical politician from the early 1920s; Count István Bethlen and even Regent Miklós Horthy.¹⁷²

No one did Prónay hate more than the longest serving prime minister of interwar Hungary, the conservative Transylvanian politician, Count István Bethlen. It was Bethlen, “the Székely trickster, who always told everyone, including the legitimists and the anti-Semites, what they wanted to hear, only to do the exact opposite immediately after their conversation,” who taught Horthy to lie.¹⁷³ Bethlen was a completely corrupt man and a pimp; in the early 1920s, he used his wife, Margit Bethlen (née Countess Mocsonyi), whom the waywardly Horthy could not resist, to gain control over Hungarian foreign and domestic policy.¹⁷⁴ Bethlen was involved in every major financial scandal of his time; he even hired people to silence the peasant leader, István Szabó Nagyatádi, who knew about his role in the so-called

Esküdt Affair.¹⁷⁵ His hunger for power knew no limits. István Bethlen, Pál Teleki, and Miklós Bánffy, “the three Transylvanian crooks,” concentrated power in their hands. They used their influence over Horthy only to line their pockets and carry out the wishes of their true masters, the Jews and the Freemasons.¹⁷⁶ Jews and Freemasons understood and feared only naked power, Prónay confided to his readers, and this is why they used Bethlen to remove him from the command of his battalion. Thank to the pro-Jewish policy of István Bethlen and his equally corrupt successors Hungary entered the war divided, weak, and completely unprepared in 1939.¹⁷⁷

The paramilitary leader tried his best to conjure up the image of a wise statesman and visionary. In the end he showed himself to be what he truly was: an ill-informed and reactionary k.u.k. officer. There is no evidence in his diary to suggest that he recognized the complexity of the modern state: the interdependence of large bureaucracies, the importance of bureaucratic inertia, and the role of political parties and pressure groups. His ignorance, in the age of democratic politics, of the so-called social question as a means of political mobilization, casts doubt on his claim that he was the first fascist in Europe. Prónay was, indeed, a radical and murderous anti-Semite; yet he could not strike the right tone with, or pander to the material interests of, shopkeepers, artisans, and blue and white collar workers, which made up the backbone of fascist movements in Europe. His elitism prevented him from even trying to create a modern mass movement. He did join the leadership of the ÉME in late 1921; however, he did not turn it into a viable political party. Typically, in the 1930s, he continued to vegetate on the margins of Hungarian political life. To my knowledge, he did not play any significant role in any of the fascist parties and movements which sprang up after the Great Depression.

Prónay wrote his diary to convince his readers of his wisdom and political skills. Instead, he painted the image of an ill-informed and paranoid man. Robins and Post contend that political paranoia has seven characteristics: extreme suspiciousness, centrality, grandiosity, hostility, fear of losing autonomy, projection, and delusional thinking. A paranoid man thinks that he is surrounded by enemies and that his life is in constant danger. He focuses on the negative and ignores information that could reduce his fear. Centrality means that he believes he is the chosen target of malevolent intent. Grandiosity is closely related to centrality; the paranoid sees himself as a hero and the savior of the world. He tends to be hostile, “belligerent, irritable, humorless and extremely sensitive to slight, combative and quarrelsome, tightly wound and bristlingly defensive. And this defensive posture contains a poised readiness to attack. To be around a paranoid is to sense that one must walk on eggshells lest he be provoked and lash out.” Because of his deep-seated suspiciousness and distrust

of others, a paranoid person is unable to create and sustain close relationships. “He acts antagonistically towards his perceived enemies and in a self-fulfilling prophecy provokes hostility, confirming that they are indeed out to get him.” The paranoid is “an injustice collector” and obsessed with the loss of autonomy: “He is constantly wary of attempts by a superior force or by outside individuals to impose their will upon him, and he manifests an exaggerated independence.”¹⁷⁸

Prónay was able to play an important role in Hungarian politics between 1919 and 1921 because large sections of the political and social elite, including Admiral Horthy, and the middle class shared his paranoia. Unlike Prónay’s illness, however, which had deeper structural roots, the elite’s paranoia passed relatively quickly (although never completely). By 1921, the elite had recognized that the danger Prónay posed far outweighed his usefulness. Horthy and Bethlen, as we have seen, first tried to buy his loyalty by offering him a respectable albeit subordinate position in the military hierarchy. Only when this soft approach had failed did Bethlen decide to drive a wedge between the paramilitary leader and his officers in order to neutralize both as a political threat. His plan proved him right: during the nationalist uprising in Burgenland in the fall of 1921, he was able to convince Prónay’s men to cut ties with their leader. Prónay’s flirtation with the idea of an independent Lajta Bánság and his refusal to come to Horthy’s aid during the second legitimist coup destroyed what slight chance he may have still had to regain control over his battalion in the foreseeable future. Having lost his power base, Prónay ceased to exist as an important political factor in interwar Hungary.

Conclusion

Prónay’s decision to revise his diary speaks volumes about the political and moral climate in Hungary in the early 1940s. This was the age, according to the poet and Holocaust victim Miklós Radnóti, “when man had stooped so low that he killed on his own volition and for pleasure and not because he was ordered to do so.”¹⁷⁹ Prónay sensed the growing callousness and indifference of his potential readers, which explains in part why he composed and planned to publish his memoirs after the outbreak of the Second World War. He felt vindicated by the war and the start of the Jewish genocide—an event that he rightly thought had its origins in a mind that was not dissimilar to his. He believed that by recalling his contributions to the counterrevolution and to the Jewish tragedy, the time had come to claim his share in the fascist and Nazi glory.

Prónay was not mistaken about his countrymen. Unlike the majority of the population today, in the interwar period, Hungarians, and Central and East-Central Europeans in general, still considered war a legitimate solution to political problems and were prepared to accept the consequences of their choice. Still, by including murder and torture scenes in his diary, Prónay overplayed his hand. He failed to understand that while violent acts were acceptable during war, talking about them remained taboo. The claim that he was the first National Socialist in Europe was an empty boast typical of Prónay. The leading Nazis, most likely, would have enjoyed listening to his diatribes about Jews, Freemasons and Communists, and some may have drawn the same sadistic pleasure from the suffering of their victims as Prónay did. However, they would not have publically admitted to their feelings or published anything to violate bourgeois sensibilities and middle-class norms (which the fascist state pretended to have restored and upheld). Prónay still spoke a crude yet honest language; he did not seek to hide the gruesome aspects of his trade. The Nazis, on the other hand, remained reticent about the genocide in public.¹⁸⁰ They were, in other words, much better at “impression management” than Prónay was.

Neither Prónay nor the architects of the Holocaust, such as Himmler and Eichmann recognized the humanity of their victims.¹⁸¹ Unlike Prónay, the Nazis, however, were able to impress their contemporaries with their diligence, sense of duty, and organizational skills—attributes, which, as the philosopher Hannah Arendt acknowledged, were modern and “highly praised in Germany and most appreciated by the Nazi bureaucracy.”¹⁸² That some of the Nazi leaders, such as Eichmann and Speer, were able to deceive their Western contemporaries about their motives testifies not only to the latter’s naiveté but also to the superior “impression management” skills of the leading Nazis. Prónay represented a more traditional type of anti-Semite and mass murderer. People like him were not absent from the Nazi apparatus (in fact, they may have been in the majority among concentration camp guards and commanders); however, they rarely achieved positions of importance.

Prónay proved to be a disappointment in every social role that he had either been born into or chose to play throughout his long life. Like a Roman or Greek actor suddenly transported to a modern stage, his gestures looked too grandiose to his contemporaries. The militia leader behaved like a *ripacs* (loosely translated, a B-movie actor). He often overplayed his hands, fell out of and confused his roles, revealed his backstage secrets and stumbled on the stage. He had set out to prove that he was a perfect gentleman; in the end, he became a counterfeit, a poseur, a gossip, a braggart—as well as a thief, a sadist, and a murderer. He sought to persuade his readers that he was the last Hungarian *úr*; in end, he showed himself as an *úri*

bitang (gentleman thug). Prónay owed his long political career to luck and inertia. Regent Horthy, for sentimental reasons, clung to him perhaps a year longer than his political interests dictated. The end of his political career was thus postponed but not averted. The elite, after two years of cooperation with the militia and the radical right, learned an important lesson: “the super-patriots,” especially if they have gained the support of foreign powers, could pose a greater threat to their interests than the moderate left. Hungarian conservatives understood and internalized the lessons of the postwar period much better than their Italian or their German counterparts. This explains why Horthy and his advisors turned against the Arrow Cross movement in the late 1930s, and why Hungary remained “a reluctant ally” of the Nazis until the German occupation of the country in March 1944.

Notes

1. For example, Zsuzsa L. Nagy argues that about five thousand people were murdered and seventy thousand were imprisoned during the White Terror. See György Ránki, Tibor Hajdu, and Lóránd Tilkovszky, eds., *Magyarország története. 1918–1919. 1919–1945* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976), 397. At the other end of the spectrum, Krisztián Ungváry put the number of victims at fifteen hundred. More than half of the victims, he argued, were murdered by the Romanian army. See “Sacco di Budapest, 1919. Gheorghe Mărdărescu tábornok válasza Harry Hill Bandholtz vezérőrnagy nem diplomatikus naplójára,” *Budapesti Negyed* 3–4 (2000): 173–203.
2. See Valéria Fukári, *Felső-Magyarországi Főúri Családok: A Zayak és Rokonaik, 16–19. század* (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2008), 89–108.
3. See Attila Bánó, *Régi Magyar Családok. Mai Sorsok* (Budapest: Gemini Budapest Kiadó, 1996), 160–165; József János Gudenus, *A magyarországi főnemesség XX. századi geneológiája*, 3. Volume, P-S (Budapest: Heraldika Kiadó, 1999), 138–140. On György Prónay see *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon 1000–1990*, <http://mek.niif.hu/00300/00355/html/ABC11587/12465.htm>.
4. See László Bencze, “Az ellenforradalmi katonai elite kialakulásának vizsgálata egy tiszti csoport pályafutásának bemutatásával 1919–1920-ban,” Ph.D. diss., n.d., The Ministry of War Archive (Hadtörténelmi Levéltár, or HL) , K 55422/70, 20–26.
5. Gábor Bencsik, *Horthy Miklós: A Kormányzó és Kora* (Budapest: Magyar Mercurius, 2001), 14.
6. See Sándor Szakály, *Honvédség és Tisztikar, 1919–1945. Válogatott írások, 1984–2002* (Budapest: Isler, 2002), 43–45.
7. On the typical path to military careers, see Tibor Hajdu, *Tisztikar és középosztály: Ferenc József magyar tisztjei* (Budapest: Historia Könyvtár, MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1999), 185.
8. *Ibid.*, 310–312.
9. M. kir. szegedi vadász zlj. 1926 szám kt. 1920. Előléptetési beadvány, HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászszázlój (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 120 doboz.
10. The official name of the town is Baden; in everyday language, people use the word Baden bei Wien (Baden near Vienna) to distinguish the town from other famous spas, such as Baden-Baden.
11. His reassignment may have had nothing to do with his performance, but reflected the declining value of cavalry units in what had become a mechanized war. Thousands of cavalry officers, who had survived the carnage of the early war years, were taken off their horses and retrained as infantry men.

12. Anton Broucek, ed., *Anton Lehár: Erinnerungen. Gegenrevolution und Restaurationsversuche in Ungarn 1918–1921* (Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1973), esp. 8–22.
13. Miklós Szabó, *Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története (1867–1918)* (Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 2003), 337–340.
14. See Ralf Georg Reuth, *Hitlers Judenhass: Klischee und Wirklichkeit* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 2009), esp. 51–103.
15. Typically, Prónay had his former orderly tracked down and got him executed him as a Communist in the fall of 1919.
16. On the disillusionment of the officer corps with the democratic regime, see Sándor Szakály, “The Officer Corps and the Hungarian Red Army,” in Peter Pastor, ed., *Revolutions and Interventions in Hungary and Its Neighbor State, 1918–1919* (Boulder, Color: Social Science Monographs, 1988), 169–187.
17. On the history of the region in 1918 and 1919, see Ignác Romsics, *A Duna-Tisza Köze Hatalmi Viszonyai 1918–19-ben* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982).
18. Hotel Kass was built in 1879; the building still exists but it has not been open to visitors since the late 1970s.
19. Dr. Béla Kelemen, *Adatok a szegedi ellenforradalom és a Szegedi kormány történetéhez (1919)*, Published by the author (Szeged: Mars Grafikai Műintézet, 1923), 271–272; Jenő Gergely, *Gömbös Gyula. Politikai Pályakép* (Budapest: Vince Kiadó, 2001), 70–71.
20. “Névjegyzék a fenti zászlóaljnál szolgálatot teljesítő tényleges és tartalékos tisztekről,” Budapest, December 18, 1920, HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászzászlóalj (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 120 doboz; also *A Magyar Katona*. Osztenburg Vadászok Lapja, February 27, 1921.
21. *A Magyar Katona*. Osztenburg Vadászok Lapja. 1921, Nr. 1; Hollós, 40–42.
22. The squad had twenty-two Jewish members. See Lajos Szabolcsi, *Két Emberöltő: Az Egyenlőség évtizedei, 1881–1931: Emlékezések* (Budapest: MTA Judaisztikai Kutatócsoport, 1993), 282–283.
23. Kelemen, *Adatok a szegedi ellenforradalom és a Szegedi kormány történetéhez*, 495–496, Bencze, “Az ellenforradalmi katonai elite kialakulásának vizsgálata,” 64.
24. C. A. Macartney, *Október Tizenötödike: A modern Magyarország története, 1929–1945*, vol. 1 (Budapest: Gede Testvérek BT, 2004), 64.

25. Lajos Varjassy, *Gr. Károlyi Mihály, Kun Béla, Horthy Miklós: Az Októberi Forradalomtól a "Bűnös Budapest Hódoltáig"* (Timisoara: Helicon, 1932), 83, 86.
26. Pál, Prónay, "Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921," National Security Historical Archive (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, or ÁBTL), 4.1. A-738/1, 87–88.
27. *Ibid.*, 126–127.
28. *Ibid.*, 163–164.
29. *Ibid.*, 102–103.
30. Mihály Perneky, *Shvoy Kálmán titkos naplója és emlékirata, 1918–1945* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983), 52.
31. See Zoltán Vas, *Horthy* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1981), 199–208.
32. For a sophisticated portrayal of Horthy see Thomas Sakmyster, *Admirális fehér lovon: Horthy Miklós, 1918–1944* (Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 2001).
33. Miklós Horthy, *Emlékirataim* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1990), 119–122, 124, 130–132, 163.
34. Jenő Pilch, *Horthy Miklós* (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1928), 140–141.
35. Prónay, "Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921," 174.
36. Vilmos Böhm, *Im Kreuzfeuer zweier Revolutionen* (Munich: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1924), 538, cited by Eliza Johnson Ablovatski, "'Cleansing the Red Nest': Counterrevolution and White Terror in Munich and Budapest, 1919" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2004), 251.
37. For the analysis of one of the "people's verdicts," including the population's response to the officers' haranguing, see Béla Bodó, "The Tószegi Affair: Rumors, 'the People's Verdicts' and Provincial Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921," *Yad Vashem Studies* 36–37 (Winter 2008).
38. Places where the detachment set up residence between August and November of 1919 included: Újpuszta/Újmajor in the outskirts of Siófok; the estate of Count László Somsics, in Kaposujlak; Count Sándor Hunyady's estate in Kéthely; the large farm of Dr. Mihály Gosztonyi in the village of Bárdi-Bükk; the estate of Count Vilmos Festetics in Toponár, on the outskirts of Kaposvár.
39. See Zsigmond Móricz, "Öreg Bölény Ment El," in Zsigmond Móricz, *A magyarság rendeltetése* (Budapest: Kortás Könyvkiadó, 2004), 111–114, Originally published in Pesti Napló, December 6, 1931.

40. Prónay alezredes. A m. kir. belügyminister Úrnak. Budapest, 1921 április 16, HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászászlóalj (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 122 doboz.
41. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 416–417, 320.
42. See Béla Bodó, “Militia Violence and State Power,” *Hungarian Studies Review*, Spring–Fall 2006.
43. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 247–252, 345–350. Typically, Gusztáv Gratz, then the Hungarian ambassador in Vienna, denied that the government was involved in the kidnapping and the assimilation attempt. See Gusztáv Gratz, *A Forradalmak Kora: Magyarország Története, 1918–1920* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1935), 117–118.
44. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 386–389.
45. One of the Austrian officers, Capt. Anton Bardorfer, emigrated to Hungary soon after the robbery and entered the Prónay Detachment.
46. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 352–354.
47. The radicals anticipated a simultaneous invasion of the Sudetenland by German forces and an Austrian attack on the Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia. Their plan was completely unrealistic: Prónay and Rácz could have mobilized, at best, only about four thousand men, who would have been no match for the large, well-equipped, and relatively well-trained and led Czechoslovak army. German and Austrian forces, if they had existed at all, most likely would not have moved, while the Yugoslav and Romanian forces would not have missed their chance to re-invade the country.
48. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 429–434.
49. Say alezredes bizalmas jelentése a tiszti különítmények és a védelmi szervek működésének módosításáról, June 17, 1920, HL. Hm. el. C. 1920-101159, in Nemes eds., *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez*, 368–369; M. kir. budapesti gyalog hadosztály parancsnokság 4038 sz/kat. 1920. Katonai nyomozók működésének beszüntetése. A M. kir. Szegedi vadász zlj. parancsnokságának, Budapest, 1920. június 17. HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászászlóalj (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 120 doboz; M. kir. budapesti gyalog hadosztály parancsnokság 4040 sz/kat. 1920. Gyanús polgári egyének letartóztatása. A M. kir. Szegedi vadász zlj. parancsnokságának, Budapest, 1920. június 17. HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászászlóalj (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 120 doboz; *Népszava*, June 15, 1920.
50. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 335–336; Gratz, *A Forradalmak Kora*, 316–324.
51. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 339.

52. Tibor Zinner, *Az Ébredők Fénykora 1919–1923* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989), 65–66.
53. Perneky, *Shvoy Kálmán titkos naplója és emlékirata*, 67–68.
54. *Népszava*, July 29, 1920.
55. *Népszava*, August 3, 1920; August 18, 1920; August 20, 1920.
56. Balázs Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál* (Budapest: Osiris, 2005), 174–175.
57. György Mattasovszky (?), (Police Chief) to the Minister of the Interior, Budapest, 14 December (?) 1920, Fővárosi Levéltár (FL), Budapest, VII. 5.c. 14506/24 Babarczy. Bp. Kir. BTTö Büntetőperek, 477–478; Pál Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 407–408.
58. Mihály Pásztor, *A fehérterror néhány jelensége Pest megyében, 1919–1920* (Budapest: Pest Megyei Levéltár, Pest Megyei Levéltári Füzetek 8, 1985), 303–304; Gratz, *A Forradalmak Kora*, 332–338.
59. Paul A. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Anti-Semitism, 1890–1944* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 108–110.
60. On the Kornhauser Affair, see Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 505–541.
61. *Ibid.*, 542–565.
62. Beside memoirs written in the interwar period (and republished after 1990), the reader can find a number of scholarly works on the history of this region after the First World War. See, among others, Mária Ormos, *Civitas Fidelissima. Népszavazás Sopronban, 1921* (Győr, 1990); József Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa, 1918–1921* (Vasszilvány: Magyar Nyugat Könyvkiadó, 2008).
63. Gratz, *A Forradalmak Kora*, 292–296.
64. Albert Váry, Deposition, Budapest, 1946 (?), FL, Héjjas and Társai, Bp.Nb Vii5e20630/49, 1009–1017.
65. Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa*, 210–211.
66. For the somewhat heroic account of these “battles” see Jenő Héjjas, *A Rongyos Gárda Harcai, 1919–1939* (Budapest: Magyar Ház, 1999). The book was first published in the late 1930s.
67. Ignác Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), 124.

68. I have found no evidence to suggest that he sought to return the province under Hungarian control after the end of the crisis.
69. Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa*, 246.
70. Ibid., 252–256.
71. Ignác Romsics, *Bethlen István: Politikai Életrajz* (Budapest: Magyarságkutató Intézet, 1991), 189–192.
72. Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa*, 260–264.
73. Mária Ormos, “Soha, amíg élek!” *Az utolsó koronás Habsburg puccskísérlete 1921-ben* (Pécs: Baranya Megyei Könyvtár, 1989).
74. Romsics, Bethlen István, 197–198.
75. Botlik, *Nyugat-Magyarország sorsa*, 293.
76. Ibid., 265–266.
77. Pál Prónay, “Tótprónai és Blatniczai Prónay Pál alezredes naplójegyzetei az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” ÁBTL 4.1. A-738, 422/16 (2/1), 291.
78. *Egyenlőség*, February 25, 1922.
79. *Pesti Napló*, August 26, 1923.
80. *Magyarország*, June 6, 1924.
81. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 333.
82. Ibid., 337.
83. Botlik, *Nyugat Magyarország sorsa*, 275–276.
84. Iván, Fekete, Protocol. Az angolszász államok ellen felkutatásra és beszerzésre vélt egyének, 1948? In György Haraszi, Zoltán Kovács, and Szabolcs Szita, eds., *Vallomások a holtak házából: Ujszászy István vezérőrnagynak, a 2. Vkf. Osztály és az Államvédelmi Központ vezetőjének az ÁVH fogságában írott feljegyzései* (Budapest: Corvina, Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, 2007), 558, 586.

85. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 6–8.
86. Kovarcz, as a member of the Ostenburg Detachment, was involved in the murder of *Népszava* editor, Somogyi, and his colleague, Bacsó, in February 1920.
87. Összefoglaló. Prónay különítmény alakulása és tevékenysége 1919–1945.-ig. ÁBTL 4.1 A-650. 422/20, 1–3.
88. Ágnes Szabó and Ervin Pamlényi, *A határban a Halál kaszál. Fejezetek Prónay Pál feljegyzéseiből* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1963), 20–221. On the Vannay Detachment, see Krisztián Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség a második világháborúban* (Budapest: Osiris, 2004), 418–420.
89. Pál Földi, *Rongyos Gárda* (Budapest: Anno Kiadó, 2010), 111.
90. Zoltán Barotányi, “A többi kegyelem. A Prónay ügy,” *Magyar Narancs*, October 31, 2003.
91. This preoccupation with discontinuity is more characteristic of modern cultural history. See Lynn Hunt, ed., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).
92. The number of Jews killed in Ukraine during the civil war, however, was much higher. From 1917 to 1921, about thirty thousand people were slain; together with those who later died prematurely from wounds, contagious diseases and other illnesses contracted during these disturbances, the number may well have reached one hundred fifty thousand or some 10 percent of the whole Jewish population. See Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 220–222.
93. On this potential of violence see Beth Irwin Lewis, *George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Matthias Eberle, *Der Weltkrieg und die Künstler der Weimarer Republik: Dix, Grosz, Beckmann, Schlemmer* (Stuttgart/Zurich: Belser, 1989); Inke Beckmann, *Selbstmorddarstellungen bei Otto Dix und George Grosz* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2007).
94. This is the first study to make use of the unedited version to discuss Prónay’s character. The diary has an interesting history: written in 1919–1922 and revised in the early 1940s, it had ended up in Czechoslovakia after the war and was smuggled back to Hungary in the late 1950s or the early 1960s. Two ideologically loyal historians published an abridged version of the diary in 1963. The authors, as might be expected, focused their attention on politically useful information, such as the relations between Horthy and Prónay, in order to implicate counterrevolutionary leaders in the White Terror. At the same time, they omitted remarks critical of the behavior of democratic and Communist leaders. See Szabó and Ervin Pamlényi, *A határban a Halál kaszál. Fejezetek Prónay Pál feljegyzéseiből*.

95. The techniques used to connect the content of the memoirs to social reality outside the text were in part inspired by Erving Goffman's classic study, *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and the methods and the techniques commonly associated with the school of symbolic interactionism; In addition to Goffman, see Bernard N. Meltzer, "Mean Social Psychology," in Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer, eds., *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972), 4–22; Jack P. Gibbs, "The Sociology of Deviance and Social Control," Morris Rosenberg and Ralph H. Turner, eds., *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 483–522, here 483–490.

96. The difference is captured best by the Hungarian saying, "A gentleman remains [i.e., behaves like] a gentleman even in hell" (*Az úr a pokolban is úr*).

97. Hajdu, *Tisztikar és középosztály*, 193.

98. On the changing social status and identity of the elite and the middle class in the interwar period, see Gábor Gyáni and György Kövér, *Magyarország Társadalomtörténete: A Reformkortól a Második Világháborúig* (Budapest: Osiris, 2004), esp. 223–240.

99. See Broucek, *Anton Lehár. Erinnerungen. Gegenrevolution und Restaurationsversuche in Ungarn 1918–1921*.

100. The image of the aristocratic traveler/farmer was perhaps first popularized by Gustav Frytag's romantic novel, *Sollen und Haben* (1855).

101. The authorities complained frequently and bitterly about the stealing of cars and motorcycles by Prónay's men. See M. kir. honvédelmi minisztérium 68762 szám/eln.26-1920. M. kir. szegedi vadász zlj. panacsnokságának, Budapest, 1920 június 28, HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászzászlóalj (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 120 doboz; Dáni, budapesti katonai körletparancsnok, Szám 9052.főnöki -1920. Szegedi vadászzászlóalj átszervezése, Budapest, 1920 szeptember 18, HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászzászlóalj (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 120 doboz.

102. Extorting money and goods from Jewish landowners and businessmen was one of the main sources of Prónay's and his men's income. See Molnár Főhadnagy, Szolgálati jegy, Fegyvernek, 1920, június 11, HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászzászlóalj (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 120 doboz; Dr. Schmitz. Hadb.ezredes. ügyész. Nyomozó és elfogató parancs. Budapest, 1921 szeptember 2, HL, Horthy-kori csapatanyag, Szegedi vadászzászlóalj (Prónay), Kt. 2439–2947, 123 doboz.

103. Ironically, the country music industry in Hungary, like modern music in general, was in the hands of religious and ethnic outsiders, mainly Jews and ethnic Germans. Thus many of the sentimental "folk" songs that Prónay and his fellow officers sang during their drunken revelries were probably written by Jews.

104. István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. 109–110.

105. Gyula Kádár, *A Ludovikától Sopronkőhidáig* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1978), 27–32, 73.
106. Mátyás Rákosi, *Visszaemlékezések, 1892–1925*, vol. 1 (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2002), 188–191.
107. For the best discussion on the functions of dueling in Hungary see Hajdu, *Tisztikar és középosztály*, 77–78, 108–109, 230–231, 249–253.
108. Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 130–138.
109. Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).
110. Hubert Mader, *Duellwesen und altösterreichisches Officierethos* (Osnabrück: Biblio, 1983), 11–16, 113–133.
111. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Életbölcsség* (Budapest: Szukits Könyvkiadó, 2001), 72–87.
112. Rákosi, *Visszaemlékezések*, 188–191.
113. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 56–58.
114. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 79–80.
115. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Vol. 1: Women, Flood, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), esp. 18, 41–45.
116. Recently, Eliza Ablovatski has argued that “the gender stereotypes of the pure ‘white’ woman versus the dangerous ‘red’ woman are not the product of the male soldier’s front experience, but were the gender assumptions all across the political right in interwar Central Europe. These were stereotypes and assumptions that were used by both sexes and across generations, not only by young men who had fought in the war and experienced the trenches.” “‘Cleansing the Red Nest,’” 229, 248–240.
117. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 345–346.
118. See Magda Sebők, ed., *Egy váradi úrilány, Benda Gyuláné Imrik Margit emlékezései* (Budapest: Noran-Kiadó, 2006). Mrs. Benda, typically, remembered one of the greatest Hungarian poets of twentieth century, Endre Ady, only as a drunkard and trouble maker.
119. He noted, for example, that one of his female visitors “has grown into a pretty woman and excellent equestrian. Yet in regards to [her] beauty, she is no match for her mother, neé Lula Nagy, the daughter of the High Sheriff of Moson County and the most beautiful and celebrated woman of her time.” See Prónay Pál, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 196.

120. Ibid., 382–384.

121. Ibid., 118.

122. Ibid., 380–382, 424–427.

123. Ibid., 421.

124. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 406–408.

125. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 283–284.

126. Ibid., 537–538.

127. Ibid., 117–118.

128. In Joseph Roth’s *Radetzky March*, the young hero, the barely more than fifteen-year-old Carl Joseph, had his first sexual experience with the wife of Sergeant Slama. The husband learned about the affair after his wife’s death (she had died during childbirth carrying the hero’s baby), but he never confronted the young cadet with the consequences of his action. On the other hand, Carl’s friend, the Jewish regimental surgeon, Dr. Demant, died in a duel, which he fought to defend the reputation and the (nonexistent) honor of his wife (she had been cheating on him for years).

129. Hajdu, *Tisztikar és középosztály*, 246–248.

130. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 7.

131. Ibid., 18–19. This was, of course, complete nonsense: the conservative politician was killed by an enraged group of war veterans. See Ferenc Pölöskei, *A rejtélyes Tisza-gyilkosság* (Budapest: Helikon, 1988).

132. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 505.

133. Ibid., 105.

134. Ibid., 46–47.

135. Ablovatski, “‘Cleansing the Red Nest,’” 239.

136. Miklós Bartha and his anti-Semitic friends published extensively on the alleged connection between Jewish usury and overseas migration. Their books and articles had impacted public opinion even before 1914, and they became part of the received wisdom in the interwar period. On peasant migration and the political debate that it engendered, see István Rácz, *A paraszti migráció és politikai megítélése Magyarországon, 1849–1914* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980).

137. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 50.
138. Prónay was, of course, mistaken. The prime minister of Serbia during the First World War, Nikola Pašić (1845–1926), was born to an immigrant family from Bulgaria in the eastern Serbian village of Veliki Izvor. He studied engineering in Belgrade, but never practiced his profession. A talented diplomat and politician, Pašić played a major role in the July Crisis in 1914.
139. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 112.
140. Ibid., 418. Neither of these statesmen was, incidentally, Jewish.
141. Ibid., 100–101.
142. On agrarian anti-Semitism, see János Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 286–289; on Istóczy see Andrew Handler, *An Early Blueprint for Zionism: Győző Istóczy's Political Anti-Semitism* (Boulder, Colo.: East-European Monographs, 1989).
143. On Szemere's fascinating life and career, see Szabó, *Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története*, 297–299, 303–305, 329–331.
144. See Béla Bodó, “White Terror, Newspapers, and the Evolution of Hungarian Anti-Semitism after WWI,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 34 (Spring 2006).
145. Reuth, *Hitlers Judenhass*, 193–254.
146. See Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 58–70.
147. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (London: J. M. Dent, 1933), 90–93, cited by Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 134.
148. On the Horthy cult, see Ignác Romsics, “Horthy képeink,” *Mozgó Világ*, 2007/17, 3–33.
149. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 355.
150. Ibid., 166–167.
151. Ibid., 325.
152. Ibid., 118–119.
153. Ibid., 279.

154. Ibid., 15.
155. Ibid., 303.
156. Ibid., 398.
157. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 35–36.
158. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 457.
159. Ibid., 361.
160. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 4; Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 363.
161. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 371.
162. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 66.
163. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 312.
164. Ibid., 443–444. Ironically, *Borsszem Jankó* (Johnny Peppercorn), the weekly humor magazine, which was edited by assimilated Jews, had the same stereotypical images of peasant leaders.
165. Ibid., 8–9, 26–27, 168.
166. Ibid., 10.
167. Ibid., 9, 162.
168. Ibid., 207.
169. Ibid., 319.
170. Ibid., 88–89.
171. Ibid., 356–357.
172. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 65, 310.
173. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 15.

174. Ibid., 366.

175. Prónay, “Naplójegyzetek az 1921. év szeptember 1-től 1922. év végéig lefolyt fontosabb eseményekre vonatkozólag,” 346.

176. Prónay, “Ellenforradalmi naplójegyzeteim 1918–1921,” 12.

177. Ibid., 12, 16.

178. Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Prost, M.D., *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 7–14.

179. “Oly koran éltem én e földön, amikor az ember úgy elaljasult, hogy önként, kéjjel öld, nemcsak parancsra, s míg balhitben hitt s tájékozott téveted, befonták életét vad kényszerképzetek,” by Miklós Radnóti, *Töredék* (Fragment, 1944); for the English translation of this poem see János Pelle, *Sowing the Seeds of Hatred: Anti-Jewish Laws and Hungarian Public Opinion, 1938–1944* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monograph, 2004), 1.

180. For example, in his infamous Table Talks, the Nazi dictator made vague reference to the ongoing genocide two or three times.

181. See the latest book on Eichmann and the Hungarian phase of the Holocaust, Ladislaus Löb, *Megvásárolt Életek: Kasztner Rezső Vakmerő Mentőakciója. Egy Túlélő Története* (Budapest: Athenaeum, 2008).

182. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), 199–200. For a more balanced analysis of Eichmann’s ideology and motives, see Corey Robins, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 95–129.

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